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The presence of minority and indigenous languages in urban naming

Proceedings of the 7th International Symposium on Place Names 2023
Jointly organised by the University of the Free State and the Joint ICA/IGU Commission on Toponymy

Bloemfontein (South Africa), 26–29 September 2023

Chrismi-Rinda Loth

Editor

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PEER-REVIEW PROCESS

Abstracts submitted to the symposium were judged independently by two members of the symposium's scientific committee (made up of experts in the field) with regards to relevance to the symposium's theme, scientific rigour, originality, and contribution to the subject field. Authors whose abstracts were accepted after the stage-one review process were included in the conference presentation programme. Authors who wished to do so submitted their full papers for the conference proceedings. The Proceedings of the 7th International Symposium on Place Names 2023 involved a rigorous double-blind peer-review process of the full papers. The review panel comprised six national and international experts on the subject of place names. Based on the outcome of the peer-review process, papers for the proceedings were selected based on the following criteria:

- Whether or not the paper disseminates original research
- Relevance to the theme
- Quality of organisation and writing

The rigorous double-blind peer-review process by the scientific review panel provided valuable comments and constructive criticism. Authors whose papers were accepted were provided with the anonymous reviewers' comments and requested to submit their revised papers. Provided that all comments were appropriately responded to, the final papers were included in the conference proceedings (ISBN: 978-1-997468-62-2). The members of the peer-review panel were not involved in the review of their own authored or co-authored papers. The role of the Editor was to ensure that the final papers incorporated the reviewers' comments, that the papers fully adhered to academic standards, and that the papers were arranged into their final order, as captured in the table of contents.

SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE OF THE PROCEEDINGS

- Prof. Theodorus du Plessis (University of the Free State, South Africa)
- Prof. Peter Jordan (Austrian Academy of Sciences, Austria / University of the Free State, South Africa)
- Dr Matjaž Geršič (Anton Melik Geographical Institute, Slovenia)
- Dr Boga Manatsha (University of Botswana, Botswana)
- Prof. Sambulo Ndlovu (University of Eswatini, Eswatini)
- Prof. ‘Maboleba Kolobe (University of the Lesotho, Lesotho)

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FOREWORD

The seventh International Symposium on Place Names (ISPN) was held 26–29 September 2023 on the Bloemfontein campus of the University of the Free State, South Africa. These Proceedings are a collection of double-blind, peer-reviewed papers from the symposium. A note of sincere gratitude from myself as well as the ISPN Organising Committee to the reviewers for their valuable contribution.

ISPN 2023 was jointly hosted by the Department of South African Sign Language and Deaf Studies (incorporating the Unit for Language Facilitation and Empowerment) at the University of the Free State and the Joint ICA/IGU Commission on Toponymy. This event was held as a partly dual event with the 27th International Afrilex Conference (African Association for Lexicography). Keynote sessions, workshops, and social events were open to delegates from both meetings. Prof. Thapelo J. Otlogetswe (University of Botswana, Botswana), the Africa keynote speaker, included a place-names aspect in his consideration of creating truly African dictionaries in his address, "Making African dictionaries African". The international keynote speaker, Prof. Myriam Vermeerbergen (KU Leuven, Belgium, and Stellenbosch University, South Africa), provided an overview of lexicographic endeavours in sign languages, including toponymic considerations, in her talk "Sign language lexicography: A snapshot of past, present and future approaches". Practising experts in their respective fields presented the two pre-conference workshops. These events were aimed at providing practical guidance to the audience. Dirkie Ebersohn from the National Institute for the Deaf (South Africa), presented on "Creating a bilingual Sign Language/English video glossary: The process at the National Institute for the Deaf (South Africa)". From the Working Group on Geographical Names Data Management of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN), Pier-Giorgio Zaccheddu provided guidance on "Geographical names data processing and management: Data processing, database management and production of geographical names information and gazetteers".

The theme of ISPN 2025 was "The presence of minority and indigenous languages in urban naming", though submissions on other toponymic issues were accepted as well. Urban place names, i.e., the names of streets, squares, and other intra-urban structures, contain cultural and symbolic value and reflect political power. They can be descriptive, such as when they indicate direction, a landmark, or the function of a structure; they can be commemorative, reminding of persons, institutions, or events; or they can be neutral, such as when they are numbered or bear the names of flowers, birds, or planets. They serve as markers of the spatial relationship between humans, groups of humans, and all that encompasses the urban landscape. With this theme, we explore both formal and informal naming, what it means to name shared spaces, what roles these names play in social dynamics, and how these names can be managed.

A recurring recommendation throughout the studies presented here is the need for authoritative guidelines. However, such regulatory frameworks have to be considerate of the deep connection between the lived experiences of the communities within which the naming takes place, the richness of linguistic diversity, and the inevitability of multiple names. While standardisation is useful in pragmatic terms, the fact that place names serve as linguistic and cultural artefacts cannot be neglected. Innovative measures must be developed to document and present place names in non-mainstream languages, such as dialects that are not standardised or signed languages that do not have written forms. The history of the names of places, as well as the etymologies of those names, could be presented in an accessible manner to the general public, an outlook that was echoed in the symposium's closing speech presented by Prof. Peter Jordan (then outgoing chair of the Joint ICA/IGU Commission on Toponymy). Given that the majority of the papers in this selection explore naming in either indigenous or minority languages, the papers highlight the importance of critical evaluation of place-naming, a deeper understanding of naming processes, and the documentation of place-name etymologies.

The first paper, by Jordan, presents the problems associated with commemorative place names. Results from a survey of commemorative place names in Austria are presented, but the findings are supported by global case studies which render the results generalisable. Attention is drawn to a common regulatory gap in this regard. The focus then turns to two studies in the Kingdom of Lesotho, where the names of chiefs are considered in naming. Both these studies explore the Sothofication (from English to Sotho) of the place-namescape of the capital Maseru in the postcolonial era. In the absence of an official place-name authority, this development can be considered a natural expression

of cultural appreciation. Kolobe, Mokala, and Mosebi identify the themes prevalent in street naming and emphasise, in particular, the role of toponyms in conveying and transmitting cultural heritage and indigenous knowledge. Offering a more detailed look at the power dynamics at play during different administrative eras, Rapeane-Mathonsi includes flags as semiotic devices for consideration. These two studies both relied on input from the local community to identify and document the place names.

The next two surveys also depend on community collaboration, the first relating to a minority group and the second to a marginalised minority community. Geršič, Horvat, and Pipan show how Slovenic microtoponyms in Hungary document historical developments in terms of land ownership, inter-ethnic relations, and linguistic maintenance. Challenges of place-name planning for a language that is being officialised but not standardised, and the modus for which no considerations are made in the official guidelines, are explored by de Lange, Kotoyi, Mapeshoane, and du Plessis in their paper on toponyms in South African Sign Language.

Once again thank you to all the authors who submitted their papers and diligently worked in the reviewers' feedback. Your participation and effort make this Proceedings a publication that contributes to the quality of toponymic research.

The Organising Committee, including the host, Prof. Annalene van Staden (Head of the Department of South African Sign Language and Deaf Studies), would like to thank all local and international delegates who participated in the 2023 Symposium. Your in-person attendance and the ensuing collaborative engagements continue to stimulate toponymic research in Southern Africa.

Chrismi-Rinda Loth

Okonjima, Namibia
July 2025

PROBLEMS OF COMMEMORATIVE NAMING IN URBAN AREAS

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an overview of a major problem-field of urban naming, i.e., commemorative naming, based on case studies in Europe, Africa, Asia, and North America as well as on the elaboration of recommendations in which the author was involved. In contrast to descriptive and "neutral" geographical names, commemorative names are reminiscent of people, institutions, or events. Although it cannot be denied that commemorative names also have an orientation function so important for names of urban features, they are often unrelated or certainly less related to the place than descriptive names. The article aims to address and discuss this and other problems of commemorative naming, such as the risk of frequent renaming due to the necessity of a correlation between the rank of the honoured and the rank of the urban feature named after them – with the consequence that names for the same feature are used in parallel. Other problems addressed are gender asymmetry, the inadequate relation between name and place, naming after persons still alive or only recently deceased, the prevailing perception of urban names as labels, the tension between the practical aspect of short names easily handled for addresses and oral communication, and the commemorative function best served by full and explicit names. The article departs from a survey of urban naming in Austrian cities and public discussions on urban naming in Austria and other countries, draws

from the global range of studies on this topic, and takes advantage of the author's engagement in national, regional, and global fora on place-name standardisation.

Keywords: Commemorative names, place names, urban names (urbanonyms)

1. INTRODUCTION

This article discusses a major problem-field of urban naming, i.e., commemorative naming, based on case studies in Europe, Africa, Asia, and North America[1] as well as on the elaboration of recommendations by the place-name boards of Austria (see AKO 2017) and Germany (see UNGEGN 2024a) and the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN, see UNGEGN 2024b and Appendix), in which the author was involved.

It deserves to be mentioned that urban names or urbanonyms – i.e., place names typical of urban features such as names of streets, squares, promenades, parks, buildings, transportation infrastructure, and particularly commemorative urban names – are a major topic, if not the main focus of critical toponomastics (also called critical toponymy[2]), which is the study of place names as political and societal constructs (see, i.e., Berg & Volteenaho 2009; Jordan 2020).

In contrast to descriptive, intentional names (e.g., *Peace Square, Bridge of Brotherhood*), and "neutral" geographical names (after plants, animals, planets, etc.) – the latter often being used today for the "thematic naming" of urban features and identity building of new urban developments ("planetary district", "birds district") – commemorative names are reminiscent of people, institutions, ideas, or events.

1 See Alderman 2000, 2002, 2003; Alderman & Inwood 2013, 2017; Autengruber 2012, 2013; Azaryahu 1996, 1997, 2012; Azaryahu & Golan 2001; Gill 2005; González Faraco & Murphy 1997; Janas 2014; Jordan 2016; Jordan & Woodman 2016; Kang 2016; Light 2004; Light & Young 2014a, 2014b; Myers 1996; Nyström 2009, 2016; Palonen 2008; Rose-Redwood 2008; Rose-Redwood, Alderman & Azaryahu 2010; Shoval 2013; Svensson-Jajko 2018; Yeoh 1996.

2 The author prefers the term *toponomastics* to *toponymy* to exhaust the possibilities of language in discerning between the toponyms, place names or geographical names of a certain region, i.e. the 'namescape', and the study of these toponyms – also in analogy to *onyms* and *onomastics*.

Commemorative naming gained ground only in the late 19th century, when urban features like streets, squares, promenades, parks, etc. received such names (see, e.g., Autengruber 2013). In some countries, and more recently, this practice has also been expanding into small towns and villages. It is, however, also true that, especially in the Global South, urban naming is practised only in central urban areas while informal naming prevails in suburbs and informal settlements (see Ben Arrous & Bigon 2022; Wanjiru-Mwita 2022).

Although it cannot be denied that commemorative names also have an orientation function so important for names of urban features and geographical names in general, they are often unrelated, or certainly less related, to the place than descriptive names, which may point in a certain direction or describe the location within the place.

This article aims to highlight this and other problems of commemorative naming by elaborating on two earlier attempts of the author's in this field (see Jordan 2021, 2022). It departs from a survey of urban naming in Austrian cities by Marlene Krapf (2015) and public discussions on urban naming in Austria and other countries, draws from the global range of studies on this topic, and takes advantage of the author's engagement in national, regional, and global fora of place-name standardisation, where commemorative naming is one of the focus themes.

2. THE IDEA OF COMMEMORATIVE NAMING

Although, as already mentioned, commemorative naming quantitatively gained ground only in the late 19th century through the spread of official street naming, it is not a new idea. It was practised in the Roman Empire, where, e.g., Nova Roma [İstanbul] was renamed *Constantinopolis* after the Roman emperor Constantine, and even earlier, when in the 4th century CE modern Plovdiv in Bulgaria was named *Philippopoli*s after Philip II, king of Macedonia, or several places became *Alexandria* after Alexander the Great.

Today, at least in the Global North, official street naming is common practice and many of these names commemorate persons, institutions, ideas, or events (see Figures 1-3).

Figure 1: *A square in Paris named after the French singer and actress Juliette Greco (Source: Author, 2022)*

Figure 2: *A street in Windhoek, Namibia, the former German colony Southwest Africa, named after Otto von Bismarck, the first chancellor (1871–1890) of the German Reich (Source: Author, 2019)*

Figure 3: *A main business street in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, named after the president of former Yugoslavia, Josip Broz, commonly known as Tito. The name was not replaced despite a basic political regime change. (Source: Author, 2014)*

It is also true that commemorative names have an orientational function (they appear on the mental map just like descriptive and neutral names), but certainly less so than descriptive names, which may point in a certain direction, describe the location within the place (e.g., *Main Square*), establish a temporal (*New Market*) or size relation (*Broadway*), or indicate the historical (*Baker Street*) or current (*Airport Drive*) function of a traffic area.

The naming of public urban features like streets and squares, but not of features in private hands like stores, stadiums, and stations, is usually done by municipal administrations, although standardisation regulations differ especially between democratic and autocratic political systems, a top-down approach tending to prevail in autocratic systems. It is interesting to see, however, that even in otherwise well-regulated societies, detailed and authoritative guidelines for the naming of urban features, e.g., don't name after living persons or wait a certain period after death, are frequently missing. They are exceptional at the country level, and at the sub-national administrative levels usually only larger cities have more detailed regulations, which are then consulted by other cities and municipalities, should problems arise (see Krapf 2015). The UNGEGN resolution in this field is only a recommendation, not binding, and has a very general content (see UNGEGN 2024b and Appendix).

3. MAJOR PROBLEMS OF COMMEMORATIVE NAMING

3.1 The risk of renaming

The risk of renaming makes commemorative names a major problem. Every new dominant political and societal force tries to leave an imprint on the linguistic landscape (in the sense of all linguistic manifestations in public space). Although it is mostly only significant regime changes and political upheavals, such as decolonisation or the collapse of Communism in eastern Europe, that leads to a wave of renaming, accidental name changes also occur in politically calmer times, e.g., because of new historical findings, new societal directions, spiritual currents, and ideas.

Thus, a section of the Ring in Vienna (Wien), the city's most representative boulevard, has recently been renamed from *Dr.-Karl-Lueger-Ring* to *Universitätsring* ("University Ring"), the descriptive name hinting at the main building of the university being located there. Dr Karl Lueger, an innovative mayor of Vienna between 1897 and 1910 with many merits, was found undeserving of being honoured in this way because he was also known for his distinct antisemitism. This dark side of his personality was always well-known but received more attention only in more recent times.

It is inherent in the principle of commemorative naming after persons that the rank of the honoured must roughly correspond to the rank of the urban feature named after them. To name a small alley or a street in a suburb after an extraordinary personality would be not an appreciation but a degradation. Renaming, therefore, preferably and repeatedly affects prominent traffic areas (see Figure 4) and may result in names used in parallel – the older and now informal being used beside the new and now official (see, e.g., Janas 2014). Older people will tend to preserve the former name, younger will use the new one; insiders well-acquainted with the place will perhaps even recognise each other by using the old name (by speaking the local dialect), while newcomers and tourists will use the name they find on the street-name plate, on the map, or in their navigation tool. Name use may also differ by political affiliation if the earlier name honoured a person of one political direction and the new one a person of the other. Not using the official name for a feature, however, is a problem for orientation, especially in emergency situations, when, e.g., ambulance or firefighters are called by older people to a street that cannot be found in official documents.

Figure 4: *The name of the main business street of Braşov/Brassó/Kronstadt in Romania has undergone three changes since 1920, with the former names still being listed on the name plate as a kind of historical lesson (Source: Author, 2016)*

Sometimes squares, parks, and streets are even divided into sub-units to find an appropriate place for a prominent name. In any case, commemorative names lead city administrations from one dilemma to another, and many certainly wish that Pandora's box had never been opened. Surviving relatives of the deceased, associations, and other lobbies to which the deceased was affiliated, also political parties, present their demands and exert pressure on administrators.

Some years ago in the Austrian city of Salzburg, for example, the widow of the head of a cultural association with many merits asked the city administration to rename a street in the historical centre after her husband immediately after his death. This caused resistance among historically conscious people because this street had a traditional name with strong reference to the place that they felt should not be erased. After a heated debate, also in the regional media, the city council decided to rename a pedestrian bridge across the Salzach, the river crossing the city centre, a small but central and prominent feature, after him. The existing name of this bridge, however, was descriptive and hinted at a popular square nearby. In consequence, the (very practical) descriptive name is still used by many people, if not the majority, while the new, official, commemorative name is

seldom heard and can mainly be found on a plate. Obviously, it was found inappropriate to assign the prominent name to a new, less prominent urban feature and a renaming is regarded as inevitable.

In the context of urban features named after persons, institutions, and events conceived as problematic and ambivalent from the perspective of later and modern historiography – for example, after the above-mentioned renaming of the *Dr.-Karl-Lueger-Ring* to *Universitätsring*, which resulted in some public discussion not only on the specific case but also on the principle of renaming in general – Austrian cities abandoned the idea of renaming features named after problematic and ambivalent persons and moved to the practice of not changing the name but rather outlining, in addition to the merits of the honoured, his/her dark side through some short sentences below the name on the name plate. This works as a popular history lesson and has the effect of commemorating, not only the glorious parts of a country's or city's history, but also its dark sides, which may have some educative value. This is of course only applicable with ambivalent figures, who have also their merits, not with persons like Hitler or Stalin.

To take new societal directions, spiritual currents, and ideas into account means (at least in democratic societies) to honour through urban names, not only members, institutions, and events of the majority society, but also those of minorities of all kinds. This can again result in renaming.

3.2 Gender asymmetry

A dominant trend of our time strives to compensate for the mostly blatant asymmetry between urban features named after men and women. This asymmetry can be explained historically by the fact that until not so long ago women very rarely held public positions. But if women were exceptionally prominent public figures such as the Austrian regent Maria Theresia or the English Queen Victoria, there was (and still is) no shortage of squares, streets, parks, bridges, train stations, and railway lines named after them.

This trend also reveals the usual commemorative naming dilemma: If only new urban features or features on the outskirts of a city are named after women, many of whom hold high office today, and not also prominent features in the centre of a city, the cause would be of little use. Another gender gap would arise; the only difference would be that the quantitative difference would be replaced by a qualitative one.

3.3 Predominance of the label over the commemorative function

As important, meaningful, and functional for commemoration as they are, in the moment of their allocation and in the event of political upheavals, over time commemorative names seem to become mere labels, and their meaning fades in everyday use. This is especially true of names after less prominent persons, institutions, or events (see, e.g., Light & Young 2014b) and probably due to the primarily practical importance of names of urban features as orientation aids and addresses. The value of commemorative names for the culture of remembrance therefore needs to be questioned. It is envisaged that this function would be better served by monuments and commemorative plaques.

3.4 Inadequate spatial relation between name and place

Another problem with commemorative names is the frequently inadequate spatial relation between the person honoured and the urban feature named after him/her. Ideally, the urban feature named after a person should be close to his/her place of birth, place of residence, or place of work. However, it is often the case, especially for merely local or regional celebrities, that a so-far unnamed traffic area is found that has little or nothing to do with them.

Of course, this desideratum of the most precise local reference possible does not apply equally to nation-wide or international celebrities. A deserving minister, prime minister, or president can certainly be honoured by an urban name anywhere in the country, and universal greats like Mozart or Michelangelo anywhere in the world.

3.5 Naming after persons still alive or only recently deceased

Events such as birthdays and handovers sometimes occasion the naming of urban features after people who are still alive. Public sentiment around the death of a notable person often leads to the commemorative name being given immediately after death. City administrations usually find it difficult to resist the pressure of the deceased's family, associations, or groups.

But precisely this can lead to premature renaming, because every new event of this kind puts the old one in the shade; or it turns out after some time that the honoured person also had dark sides. It is therefore stated in many guidelines and supported by UN Resolution VIII/2 "Commemorative naming practices for geographical features" (see UNGEGN 2024b and Appendix) that a person who is still alive should not be honoured with a commemorative name, and that a waiting period should be observed as a 'cooling-

off phase' in the case of deceased persons. However, city administrations often do not adhere to this, and the prescribed waiting periods are very different in length (ranging from one to five years).

3.6 Practical aspects

There is also a tension between the shortness of a street name, which is desirable for practical reasons, and the clear recognisability of the person honoured by it, which is required by the commemorative purpose. Names of streets, squares, and other urban features are part of addresses and are often used to provide information, arrange meeting points, etc. For these purposes, long names that consist of first and family names (and may be supplemented by a title or a function) are obstructive and therefore mostly abbreviated in practical and oral use (to the family name).

However, this contrasts with the purpose of a commemorative name, which is to pay tribute to a specific person who can often only be identified by their first name and family name. *Baker Street*, e.g., does not necessarily remind one of Josephine Baker, even if the latter was intended.

4. ALTERNATIVES

A way to avoid street naming after persons, in new developments at the fringes of larger cities or in smaller towns in rural areas, is to use the names of former houses, farmsteads, or fields that previously characterised the area. This prevents the former cultural landscape and its geographical features and names from falling into oblivion.

Based on Resolution VIII/2, 'Commemorative naming practices for geographical features', of the 8th United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names 2002 in Berlin (see UNGEGN 2024b and Appendix), the following proposal was made by the Austrian Board on Geographical Names in its 'Recommendations for the naming of urban traffic areas' (see the original in AKO 2017) and later (2018), which also include similar recommendations of the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names [Ständiger Ausschuss für Geographische Namen] for Germany (see UNGEGN 2024a). In English translation the Austrian recommendations have the following wording:

1) Names of traffic areas should in the first line comply with the function of orientation.
2) Well-established names are not to be changed without good reason.
3) With renamings, the after-effects of the former name in practical use should be taken into account.
4) Similar names or names easily mixed up with existing names should be avoided within a municipality.
5) With new namings, field names and/or other names in local use should be applied.
6) If, nevertheless, commemorative names, i.e., names reminding of persons and events, are applied, this is to be done with caution and restraint.
    a) Commercial names, i.e., names of companies and their products, should be avoided.
    b) Namings after persons still alive should be avoided. A break of at least five years after the passing of the person is recommended.
    c) The person commemorated should have had a relation or (also) importance for the place (e.g., place of birth, work location).
    d) Taking into account the name length, names after persons should comprise first name and surname (e.g., *Karl-Schweighofer-Gasse*) to enable an unambiguous identification of the person. Titles (*Ing*., *Dr*., *Prof*. etc.) should be avoided.
    e) Taking into account the historically explicable asymmetry of namings after males and females, it is recommended that females should be considered for new namings.

5. CONCLUSION

Commemorative names that are applied mainly (but not only) to urban features offer an opportunity to honour people and institutions. They reflect political power and societal hierarchies but have the essential disadvantage, compared with descriptive names, of being less useful for geographical orientation, a major function of place names. Furthermore, urban features are at risk of being renamed when political power changes and new societal directions gain ground, because the rank of the named feature needs to correspond to the rank of the honoured. Renaming frequently results in parallel name use for the same feature and ambiguity in orientation. Commemorative names also reflect the historical gender asymmetry in prominent public positions, which is – due to the problems of renaming and the rank-order principle mentioned above – difficult to modify and to adapt to our modern, much more balanced gender situation.

It is a deficiency of commemorative names in respect of their commemorative function that, except for names that honour very prominent persons, institutions, and events, they are handled as labels in daily use and hardly anybody is reminded of whom or what they honour. Furthermore, due to the fact that new urban features need names, while already-named features should not, if possible, be renamed, there is rarely a spatial correspondence between the feature named and the person, institution, or event honoured. Strong pressure exerted by the family or interest groups results in naming after persons still alive or only recently deceased, which may in the long run result in further renaming.

The commemorative function of commemorative names competes with the practical need for short names, since urban names are part of addresses.

These are several reasons why UNGEGN as well as national geographical name boards discourage the use of commemorative names in favour of descriptive names with their significantly higher orientation function. Indeed, there are much more practicable and well-established modes of commemorating people, institutions, and events such as monuments and memorial plaques that do not, much in contrast to commemorative urban naming, compete with other functions such as orientation and addresses.

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APPENDIX

UN Resolution VIII/2 Commemorative naming practices for geographical features (passed by the 8th United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, Berlin, 27 August – 5 September 2002, UNGEGN 2024b)

The Conference,

- Noting that the use of names of persons or events to designate features for commemorative purposes or as geographical reminders constitutes an active practice,
- Recognizing that the attribution of a personal name to a geographical feature during the lifetime or shortly after the death of a person is a widespread practice,
- Recalling that, during a meeting of 1960, the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names acknowledged that naming or renaming of a geographical feature to include the name of a living person could be a source of problems,
- Recognizing that this practice is generally disadvantageous, as this type of designation is subject to subsequent changes not recommended by the Conference,
- Noting that little guidance exists on the practice of adopting a personal name during the lifetime or shortly after the death of a person,

  1) Recommends that the appropriate national authorities discourage the use of personal names to designate a geographical feature during the lifetime of the person in question;

  2) Also recommends that the appropriate national authorities include in their guidelines clear statements on the length of the waiting period they wish to establish before using a commemorative name.

STREET NAMES AND STREET NAMING IN MASERU: NAVIGATING THE LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the naming of streets in the areas around Maseru town. It examines the street names in use, the processes by which these names were selected, and the thematic patterns that emerge across key locations. Employing a qualitative methodology within a multiple case study design, the research draws on both primary and secondary sources. Initial data were obtained through interviews using a snowball sampling technique, involving one official from the Maseru City Council and two local councillors. These interviews provided insights into the procedures and community involvement in the street-naming process. Additional perspectives were gathered through informal interviews with randomly selected community members, who shared stories about how their streets came to be named. To compile a comprehensive list of street names, the researchers conducted fieldwork that involved driving through the areas, photographing visible street nameplates,

and recording names through field notes. This approach allowed for a wide and representative collection of data. Through a triangulated framework that combines Ethnographic Linguistic Landscape Analysis and onomastics, the study reveals that local communities played an active role in the naming process. The street names reflect strong elements of cultural heritage, identity, and environmental context, all of which contribute to the linguistic landscape and express the unique character of the Basotho people. The study concludes by recommending the standardisation of street names and the formalisation of naming regulations in Lesotho, to enhance consistency and preserve cultural identity.

Keywords: Linguistic landscape, minority languages, Maseru City Council, onomastics, street names, street naming

1. INTRODUCTION

Before Lesotho gained its independence in 1966, public signs and street names in particular bore the names of colonisers or referred to events of importance during colonial rule. This situation compromised dissemination of indigenous knowledge from one generation to another, resulting in Basotho youth lacking awareness of the culture and history of their own country and nation. The significance of naming for conveying the culture and identity of a nation is highlighted by Cooper *et al*. (2011) who explain that "the names we choose symbolise a great deal about our culture and view of the world." In contrast to the existing wealth of research on naming in various aspects of life in Lesotho, there are very few studies on street names and the processes of street naming that promote knowledge of the culture and history of the Basotho (the main ethnocultural group of Lesotho). The current study investigates the naming of streets in the areas around Maseru, the capital of Lesotho. It examines the street names in use, the processes by which these names were selected, and the thematic patterns that emerge across ten key areas. The study intends to inform the development and planning sector of Lesotho of the guidelines to be considered when naming territories, creating street-name databases, and encouraging maintenance of street names.

The Maseru City Council (MCC) is the only municipal council in Lesotho. The Council is responsible for local governance in Maseru, including developments such as infrastructure and urban planning, which would encompass street naming (Lebentlele 2000, International Labour Organisation 2014). However, the MCC does not have a policy that governs street naming. To carry out the process of naming streets where

streets have not been named before, or of renaming streets, the MCC either proposes street names to the community (in order to ease access to their location in terms of formatting the physical addresses) or the community itself proposes the street names to the MCC. The Council is always ready and flexible enough to consider any name that might be suggested, although they always encourage the communities to name according to themes, memorable events, or cultural influences to avoid the chances of subsequent generations replacing the existing names. Moreover, the Council discourages naming after living persons or current organisations as they may be controversial. Naming of streets in Lesotho has not been popular except for commemorative and administrative areas that were named by colonisers for administrative purposes. This study presumes that the city seemed too small to warrant the naming of places, particularly streets, but since independence, Maseru city has grown rapidly and a need to identify places could not be ignored (Gill 1993, Lebentlele 2000). What triggered the current study is an observation that street names in and around Maseru town bear Sesotho names that seem to be reviving the history and culture of the Basotho, though whether the names reflect concerted planning is open to debate.

While the country of Lesotho has promoted visibility of places by distinguishing them by name, the present study has seen an opportunity for research on the naming process and the given names themselves. It is also observable that the nation is uplifting the use of Sesotho in a number of ways, including by naming products, businesses, brands, and streets in Sesotho. While in the past Lesotho was dotted with English street names (Caledon Road, Hilton Road, Kingsway, Pioneer Road, Lancers Road), there is currently an obvious shift away from the foreign names to Sesotho names, marking a significant transformation in street naming in Lesotho.

It is worth mentioning that even though there are other indigenous languages in Lesotho, Sesotho is the language spoken by the majority of Basotho (Kolobe & Matsoso 2021). The Sesotho language is a mixture of language variations spoken by different clans under the leadership of Moshoeshoe I, who is the founder of the Basotho nation. The Sesotho language played an important role in unifying various clans during King Moshoeshoe I's reign. The language enabled him to rule a united nation with one medium of communication. In this context, the Sesotho language can be seen as the Basotho's "deep identity" (Gilbert 2010:40) – it is the medium through which they share a history, customs, beliefs, values, and practices as a nation. At present, "apart from being an official language, along with English, Sesotho is also a national language, that is, it is … a language of political, social and cultural participation [and] a language

that offers speakers an identity" (Moloi & Motsau 2011:68-69). This study argues that the naming of streets in Lesotho should be considerate of its culture and history and be standardised. Mokala (2020:220) concurs that the "Naming system among Basotho follows certain processes which reflect their belief systems and cultural heritage among other things." Rusu (2020:1) underscores the value of street names that encapsulate broader and intersecting issues of memory, belonging, language, and space. In the same vein, Mulaya and Siame (2025) add that street naming reflects environmental affinity, which fosters cultural identity. This implies that a study such as this one is significant as a first step towards standardisation, sustainability, and visibility of street names in Lesotho.

The aim of this study was to examine street naming and street names in Lesotho in order to analyse the themes of these emerging names and develop an understanding of the motivation behind the given names. The study attempts to address the question of how street naming is done in Lesotho. The study focused on ten areas around Maseru town, namely Katlehong, Mohalalitoe, Thetsane (Lower, East, and West), Thamae (Lower and Upper), Moshoeshoe 11, Hoohlo, Hillsview, Maseru East, Maseru West, and Seapoint. All these locations are within walking distance of Maseru town. The selection of the areas was influenced by the researchers' linguistic landscape observation that names given to streets in these areas are in Sesotho language and they seem to follow a certain pattern.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The premise of this study is that street naming is attributive of the linguistic landscape associated with a certain area. Blommaert and Ico (2014) affirm that research on the linguistic landscape (LL) has become of more interest to researchers for several reasons. They highlight that LL serves as an ambassador of an area by giving a picture of a language or languages spoken in that particular area. It also provides a platform for research on the language in public spaces. The present study finds that the current trend in Lesotho is that streets are named in the Sesotho language, reflecting the culture and history of Basotho. A study by Cenoz and Gorter (2006) asserts that "the linguistic landscape contributes to the construction of the sociolinguistic context because people process the visual information that comes to them, and the language in which signs are written can certainly influence their perception of the status of the different languages and even affect their own linguistic behaviour" (p. 68). Nonetheless, the importance of street identification cannot be ignored. As a result, the present study underscores the relevance of the LL in exploring street names in Lesotho, particularly those which are given in Sesotho in the areas around Maseru town.

According to Alderman (2023), nameless places are disorientated places that lack social and cultural particularity, while Rui and Othengrafen (2023) clarify that distinguished streets offer better visibility of such factors by, for example, promotion of their liveability and environmental footprint for decades and centuries to come. Besides the traditional, primary function of aiding navigation, street names have acquired other values, such as transfer of a nation's cultural information from generation to generation (Hough 2016, Matiza & Dube 2020, Heng 2020, Mushati 2013, Majola & Lemeko 2024, Kareem 2025), as turned out to be the case in this study.

Kallen (2023) explains that the linguistic landscape is a fundamental aspect that enhances social uniqueness and effective communication. As a way of conveying a condensed message, the Basotho name a street to represent the culture and history of the Basotho who live in that particular area. Where the streets are named in Sesotho, the linguistic landscape reflects the power of language to inscribe Basotho culture in a public space. The critical role of street names in evoking cultural memory is well described by Ferguson (1988) and Heng (2020), who state that such names are significant cultural indicators. In other words, street names are a fundamental element of the linguistic landscape, serving as a pervasive and enduring form of public textual display. Legère and Rosendal (2018) underscore the omnipresence of linguistic forms in everyday environments. The current study argues that the act of naming streets becomes a linguistic practice that reflects the broader values and stories of a community. Shen (2022) confirms the link between the linguistic landscape and street names as a symbolic construction of identity by explaining that language is everything that we see (as we see with street names in this case), since we are able to infer or attach meaning to everything that meets the eye. The linguistic landscape illustrates how public spaces such as a street can communicate a society's uniqueness and can reveal the social position of people who identify with particular languages (Dagenais *et al*. 2009:254).

Landry and Bourhis (1997) describe the linguistic landscape as constituted by street names and street signs. According to them, the linguistic landscape encompasses "the language of public road signs … place names, street names … and public signs on government buildings, of a given territory, region or urban agglomeration" (p. 25). In other words, it is through the linguistic landscape that society is informed about the territory in question. A visible unit of the linguistic landscape such as a street name or a street sign is understood to mediate between a sign instigator and a sign viewer. The sign viewer is often a passing stranger whom the sign instigator will try to engage as an interlocutor (Kallen 2023).

Cenoz and Gorter (2006) attest that the linguistic landscape contributes to the construction of the sociolinguistic context. In order to understand the meaning behind the Sesotho names of streets in Maseru, one attaches the name given in Sesotho to the culture that connects Basotho people and the history they share. UNGEGN (2015:17) posits that every place names tell a story that is relevant to the culture that bestowed the name. Moreover, Chabata (2012:23) observes that, when it comes to place naming, "the socio-cultural aspect cannot be left out of consideration and it is commonly agreed, that toponyms belong to the immaterial cultural heritage of mankind." The same sentiment is shared by Guma (2001) and Ntshangase (2025) who underscore the significance of names and naming process as historical and cultural in that they remind inhabitants of who they are and where they come from. Toponyms enable people to look beyond the name but also to delve into the original reasons why a particular name was given under certain socio-cultural conditions. It is against this backdrop that the current study shares Loth, Kotzé and De Lange's (2022) view that the linguistic landscape is an essential aspect of language visibility. Because of the use of Sesotho in street naming in Maseru, the language has become more visible than before. Basotho are likely to relate more to their places because they are named in their native language, which contributes not only to Sesotho language visibility but also to sharing the richness of Basotho culture and history.

Letsoela (2015) conducted a study to examine the naming system of bus stops in Lesotho, focusing on what motivates the name given to the bus stop. The findings of her study reveal four categories of names. The first category of bus stop names is descriptive, i.e., names that reflect physical features that are visible in the vicinity of the bus stop. The second category of bus stop names is the metaphorical. Other names are considered experiential because they reflect historical events. The last category is mythological and represents local beliefs.

Using a questionnaire given to students in one university in Lesotho, the study collected bus stop names from all the districts of Lesotho and the explanations of why a particular name was given to a certain bus stop. Letsoela's study concluded that bus stop names are ambassadors of cultural, historical, and social information and reflect the Basotho's experiences, emotions, and beliefs. Letsoela's study aligns with Snodia *et al.*'s (2010) view that toponyms, besides labelling things for the purpose of differentiation, have sentimental, religious, and cultural significance. These authors explain that "… because toponyms bind societies to the setting, they provide a vital comprehension into the society's traditional way of life thus their culture" (p. 15). Chauke (2015) shares the

same view as the above authors that societies give names to their settings in order to offer a distinctive source of evidence about a society's history, beliefs, and values.

Another study was conducted by Khanyetsi in 2022. Her study foregrounds creativity in place naming among the Basotho. In her study, she demonstrates the importance of creativity when naming places in order to avoid name duplication. Her study reveals that the Basotho duplicate place names not only at inter-district level but also within districts themselves, hence it is advisable to use names which ensure the possibility of the chief name being extended to other places where that chief's sons might settle. According to Khanyetsi, name duplication is due to the naming processes practised by Basotho, such as renaming of a place after a chief. Khanyetsi's finding is relevant to the focus of this study as it enhances the researchers' understanding of the motivation behind place names, particularly street names, and offers us insight into the motivation behind the naming process. Khanyetsi proposes a solution to the problem of name duplication in the form of the creative approach used by miners in *lifela tsa litsamaea-naha*, that is, "migrants' (mine workers') chants" (Tsiu 2008:1) Her study highlights that while these miners walked miles and miles, they invented various names drawn from the environment and circumstances they encountered. As a result of this, the places that they passed have diverse names. The naming of streets can also be influenced by experiences of the Basotho as a nation, such as world wars and plagues that the country endured. Jordan (2012) concurs with Khanyetsi that place names reflect how people perceive and build their environment. Khanyetsi's study relates to the research question posed in this study about how the naming of streets in Maseru is done.

In another vein, Matsetse (2023:93) asserts that names indicate the area's "specificness". As Matsetse proposes, elders and other persons knowledgeable about the history of an area to be named need to subject naming of streets to a thorough evaluation to ensure appropriateness of names. Matsetse's argument aligns with the present study's appreciation of indigenous knowledge as reflected in the street names given by knowledgeable members of the community living in a specific area. In this study, the MCC invited the community to engage in naming their streets in recognition of the shared knowledge of the culture and history of the Basotho.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study applied the principles of two theories, the Ethnographic Linguistic Landscape Analysis (ELLA) (Blommaert & Maly 2014) and onomastic framework (Clark 2005). ELLA emphasises the multi-layered meaning of signs (in this case, street names) and their

connection to time (past, present, future) and space (social and cultural landscapes). In the colonial past, English street names were imposed, reflecting power dynamics, colonial occupation, and cultural erasure. In the present, the shift toward Sesotho street names is a form of identity reclamation – a visual and symbolic assertion of Basotho heritage and language in public spaces. The future axis invites reflection on how naming practices might evolve, especially in light of Lesotho's multilingual reality, urban development, and cultural shifts. ELLA allows for a nuanced analysis of how names operate beyond language – as social, political, and historical texts inscribed into the urban landscape. It highlights naming as a practice shaped by a community's power and agency.

Onomastic theory enhanced the identification and analysis of street names in Maseru. Onomastics helps to explore the semantics, structure, and cultural significance of street names. This includes investigating the principles and patterns behind name selection – whether names commemorate historical figures, local heroes, cultural symbols, or reflect geographical/topographical features. Onomastics provides a systematic way of evaluating how names function as markers of identity, as Mokala (2020) states. Onomastics complements ELLA by zooming into the names themselves, examining their etymology, meaning, and cultural associations. While ELLA is more macro (social and temporal meaning), onomastics offers a micro-level linguistic and cultural analysis.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach using multiple case studies of the areas surrounding Maseru town. This qualitative approach aims to identify the names of streets, particularly those given in the Sesotho language, to understand how street naming is done in Lesotho, and to describe the themes of the street names found in the areas around Maseru town.

Our interest in this study was two-fold. We wished to understand how streets in Maseru are named and thus the processes involved in naming. As such, we approached the Planning Department at Maseru City Council and councillors in Maseru to explain how the naming process was done. We also wished to identify Sesotho street names in the areas around Maseru town. The street names were captured using a smartphone while other names were recorded on a notepad. The following sections explain the two phases of data collection.

Using snowball sampling, the researchers interviewed three respondents: one officer from MCC, who is the head of the planning department, and two councillors from one

of the research areas that were asked to describe how street naming was done. We also randomly picked five community members, as we were collecting data in their areas and asked them how the streets acquired the names that they have. It should be noted that the sample for this study was not based on statistical procedures because the study was qualitative. This position is supported by Du Plooy (2001), who explains that the validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative design have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected than with the sample size. The information that was provided by the selected respondents was sufficient to generalise the ideology behind street names and street naming in Lesotho, particularly in Maseru.

Furthermore, the researchers collected data through LL observation. They drove around areas surrounding Maseru town and, using a cell phone, took snapshots of street names that they could see as they were driving. The linguistic landscape observation method was found appropriate for this study because it allowed the researchers to collect data as they were driving along the streets. The method ensured validity and reliability of the data. They also made field notes on the street names to maximise their collection of data. The data was collected from the ten areas around Maseru town, namely: Katlehong, Mohalalitoe, Thetsane, Thamae, Moshoeshoe 11, Hoohlo, Hillsview, Sea Point, Maseru East, and Maseru West. This selection of areas was done to minimise biased data. In addition, this context called for research on toponymy, because even though Maseru town is a multiracial place, the researchers observed that the surrounding areas have street names in Sesotho instead of English, which is the language of commerce.

5. DATA PRESENTATION

The study collected data in two phases. In the first phase, interviews were conducted with a Maseru City Council (MCC) officer and with community councillors to understand the street-naming process in Maseru. When asked how the naming of streets is done in Maseru, the MCC officer explained that community councillors were actively involved in the process. As the support body of the MCC in the communities, the councillors were informed about urban landscape development and the necessity of naming streets as part of this initiative.

The councillors were tasked with mobilising their communities and working collaboratively with local chiefs to facilitate the naming process. Community members were invited to propose street names that resonated with their local identity. They were given autonomy to suggest names, providing they adhere to the clear guidelines provided by the MCC. The purpose of these guidelines is to ensure that names remain culturally

relevant, neutral, and inclusive. Instead of political affiliations or personal preferences, the emphasis is on names that reflect environmental elements, cultural heritage, and the historical background of the Basotho people.

Although community participation in the naming process was generally low, councillors were able to identify and select themes that reflected the character and values of their respective areas. Both councillors and community members contributed names they felt best represented their spaces.

The second phase of data collection involved compiling and analysing the proposed street names (see the figures below). The findings revealed that the chosen names were largely descriptive of Basotho culture, encompassing themes such as traditional leadership, indigenous flora and fauna, celestial elements, and historical references. These names serve as important cultural signifiers within the urban linguistic landscape of Maseru. Figure 1 below shows street names in Katlehong.

Figure 1: *Katlehong streets named after geographical affinity (Source: Authors)*

The above figure shows streets that are named after shrubs found in Lesotho. The names include Lekhala, Mohloare, Mohalalitoe, and Monokotšoai. Streets in Thetsane East show names of Basotho blankets, such as Motla Le Khosana, Seanamarena, Malakabe, and Qibi (Figure 2).

Figure 2: *Streets named after Basotho blankets at Thetsane East (Source: Authors)*

Figure 3 below shows streets in Thetsane West named mostly after Basotho clans and grass, for example, Koenaneng, Taung, and Tloung. In the same area of Thetsane West, data revealed that other streets predominantly follow the names of grasses such as Tšinabelo, Shoeshoe, Qhawhaoe, and Molula (Figure 4).

Figure 3: *Streets named after clans of Basotho at Thetsane West (Source: Authors)*

Figure 4: *Streets names reflecting geographical affinity at Thetsane West (Source: Authors)*

Streets in Moshoeshoe 11 are named after Basotho chiefs such as Maama and Sekonyela, as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5: *Street named after Basotho head chiefs in Moshoeshoe 11 (Source: Authors)*

Maseru West shows mixed themes. There are instances of renaming which evoke history (Lancers Road, Caldwell Road), mountains, rivers, animals, plants, clans, and creativity, including Moseeka, Tona-Kholo, Caledon, and Maluti (see Table 1 and Figure 6 below).

Figure 6: *Street names in Maseru West (Source: Authors)*

Maseru East is symbolic of geographical affinity. There are streets named after cardinal points, stars, and rivers, such as Bochabela in Figure 7 below.

Figure 7: *Street names in Maseru East (Source: Authors)*

Figure 8 below shows a street that is named after birds in the Hillsview area, i.e., Maeba.

Figure 8: *Streets named after birds in Hillsview (Source: Authors)*

6. DATA ANALYSIS

Data were analysed thematically to show the different categories of street names in the areas around Maseru town. Siame and Banda (2012) contend that thematic analysis is prominent in qualitative research as it allows researchers to classify the collected data into specific themes. The researchers presented the street names on a table showing the area where the names were collected, and the identified theme. It is important to mention that the established themes matched our observation that naming of streets was influenced by Basotho culture and the environment that the communities are situated in. Reflection on the location of the street enhances our understanding of what influenced the community to choose a certain theme for the street. The table below presents analysis of street names in the ten areas around Maseru town.

Table 1: *Street names in Maseru which depict history and cultural heritage of Basotho*

Area	Theme	Street names
1. Katlehong	Shrubs	*Mabelebele, Morobei, Lelothoane, Sehalahala, Cheche* *Monokotšoai, Tšinabelo*
2. Lower Thetsane	Rivers	*Malibamatšo, Makhalaneng, Sebapala, Senqu,*
	Chiefs	*Senqunyane, Khubelu, Mohokare* *Mohato Ring*
3. Thetsane West	Grass	*Leloli, Molula, Qhaqhaoe, Seboku, Tšaane, Moseeka*
	Animals	*Pulumo, Nkoe*
	Mountains	*Qiloane, Thaba-bosiu, Qhoali*
	River	*Koma-Koma*
	Clans	*Taung, Kubung, Phuthing, Rolong, Tloung, Tlokoeng*
	Creativity	*Boiketlo, Bolepeletsa, Bo-ala-Thapo, Bofula-Tšepe*
	Plants	*Bobatsi*
4. Thetsane East	Blankets	*Maapara-Kobo* *Lilala, Pitso, Malakabe, Sefate, Seanamarena,Qibi* *Setsoto, Lehlaku, Lefitori*
5. Hillsview	Birds	*Mohololi, Manong, Motjoli, Maeba, Tjobolo, Molepe* *Thaha, Matlaka*

Area	Theme	Street names
6. Moshoeshoe 11	Chiefs	*Lerotholi, Majara, Mopeli, Maama*
	Prominent figure residence	*Kolonyama*
7. Thamae	Plants	*Tsikitlane, Tika-Motse*
	Creativity	*Phatlalla, Tabola*
8. Maseru East	Cardinal points	*Bochabela*
	Trees	*Moluoane*
	Dams	*Maqalika Mejametalana*
	Stars	*Mphatlalatsane, Naleli*
	Tradition	*Mokorotlo*
9. Maseru West	Rivers	*Qoqolosing*
	Mountains	*Maluti, Mathebe*
	Chiefs	*Moorosi, Lerotholi, Lepoqo, Sekhonyana*
	Prominent figures	*Tona-kholo, Moshoeshoe, Senate, Mohlomi, Mafatle, Khaketla*
	Clans	*Taung*
10. Mohalalitoe	Birds	*Pikoko, Seroebele, Leeba, Khoale*
	Shrubs	*Cheche, Shoeshoe, Mohalalitoe, Kharetsana, Mabelebele, Tšinabelo, Molokotšoai, Morobei*
	Trees	*Mohloare*
	Rivers	*Mohokare*
	Plants	*Lekhala, Mabele, Seruoe*
	Animals	*Tau, Kubu*

These results are analysed from an ethnographic linguistic perspective, as well as an onomastics theoretical approach

6.1 Ethnographic linguistic analysis

Ethnographic linguistics examines how language reflects and shapes social and cultural life. In this context, the street names are not just functional labels; they carry rich cultural

meanings and collective memory, as shared by several researchers mentioned in this paper like Mokala (2020), Rusu (2020), and Letsoela (2015). From the collected data, it was noted that each area around Maseru town reflects a cultural domain tied to Basotho heritage, as described below:

Katlehong has the theme of **shrubs**. Names like Mabelebele, Morobei, and Sehalahala refer to indigenous flora deeply embedded in rural Basotho life and traditional medicine. According to Snodia *et al*. (2010), the presence of these names preserves knowledge of the natural environment and affirms eco-cultural identity.

Lower Thetsane has **rivers** and **chiefs** as a theme. Water sources like Malibamatšo, Senqu, and Mohokare are crucial to Basotho livelihoods and spiritual beliefs, such as river spirits and ancestral cleansing. These river names (and the name of Mohato Ring) are also tied to chieftainship boundaries, symbolising authority and social structure.

Thetsane West has **mixed themes**. This area demonstrates the richest variety, with some names representing nature (grass, mountains, rivers). Qiloane and Thaba-Bosiu are sacred mountains, associated with the country's founding history and Moshoeshoe I, the Basotho king. Another theme is animals and plants, which may symbolise clan totems (Nkoe, Tloung). It is important to note that when place names are derived from nouns, the name usually ends in -ng, thus Tlou will be Tloung. The use of clan names directly embeds kinship and lineage into urban space, keeping oral traditions and social organisation alive. Thetsane West also has creativity as another theme. Names like Boiketlo reflect Basotho creativity and values.

Thetsane East has the theme of **blankets**: Street names refer to Basotho blankets such as Seanamarena, Lilala, and Malakabe, which are central to Basotho identity and status. These names honour material culture and signify modern symbols of tradition.

Data shows that the Sesotho language is predominant and demonstrates linguistic pride. The use of these names in urban areas implies that urban spaces are linguistically ruralised, reflecting cultural continuity despite modernisation. As shared by Guma (2001) and Ntshangase (2025), street names are an unwavering reminder of the history shared by the inhabitants of such areas.

6.2 Onomastic theory perspective

Onomastics focuses on the study of names, including toponyms (place names) and their origins, meanings, usage, and social functions (Bright 2003).

The collected data shows names classified into various onomastic categories, including topographical names like Thaba-Bosiu (mountain) and Senqu (river) and anthroponymic names showing clans or chiefs like Mohato, Taung, and Rolong. Another category comprises floral and faunal names, as in Cheche, Tšaane, and others. The last category comprises cultural objects such as blankets (Seanamarena, Pitso). It is worth mentioning that such names show the inclusivity and communal spirit that characterise the Basotho nation.

This typological range shows that Basotho intentionally name their streets to commemorate, preserve, and honour the various natural, social, and symbolic aspects of Basotho life. Naming streets in Maseru according to these different natural topologies is a move towards preserving the language, even for generations to come.

In addition, the collected data demonstrate symbolic and social functions such as commemoration, social stratification, and didactic and cultural branding. For example, names like Thaba-Bosiu evoke national memory, as the place was the stronghold of Moshoeshoe I, the founder of the Basotho nation. In addition, Thaba-Bosiu is a sacred place for Basotho and is symbolic of their foundation (Gill 1993). Reference to chieftainship and clans (Mohato, Taung) in street names mirrors socio-political hierarchies and kinship affiliations, acknowledging the important role they play in governing their communities. Other names may serve as transmitters of Basotho moral and cultural values, as in the case of the street name Boiketlo, which teaches the value of peace, prosperity, and relaxation. It is also observable that by naming streets after culturally significant items such as blankets, Maseru affirms its identity against the backdrop of globalisation and Westernisation while preserving the Basotho's national identity and culture.

7. DISCUSSION

The analysis of street names in selected areas of Maseru – Katlehong, Lower Thetsane, Thetsane West, and Thetsane East – reveals a deliberate and culturally resonant naming system that reflects and reinforces Basotho identity, history, and worldview. The finding aligns with the findings of Ferguson (1988) and Heng (2020) that street names, especially on city streets, evoke cultural memory. Through the application of ethnographic linguistic analysis and onomastic theory, the findings suggest that street-naming practices function far beyond simple geographic labelling; they serve as a repository for cultural memory, ecological knowledge, social structure, and national pride.

7.1 Cultural continuity in urban space

One of the most prominent findings is how traditional rural and oral knowledge systems are preserved in the urban landscape. The names of plants (Sehalahala, Morobei, Cheche), rivers (Senqu, Mohokare), and mountains (Thaba-Bosiu, Qiloane) bring historically and ecologically significant landmarks into everyday urban discourse. This reflects an intentional act of cultural continuity, where indigenous ecological and geographical literacy is embedded in the infrastructure of modern life. Such naming practices highlight an urban-rural interdependence, where the city does not erase the countryside but rather reflects and remembers it. This reinforces a sense of place and identity for residents, especially in a postcolonial context where reclamation of indigenous space is both symbolic and political. These findings echo Cenoz and Gorter (2006) as well as UNGEGN (2015), who affirm the fundamental role of street names as ambassadors that tell a story of the people found in that area. In the same vein, Mulaya and Siame (2025) contend that place naming fosters cultural identity.

7.2 Language as a tool of identity and resistance

The use of Sesotho names throughout the dataset points to a conscious embrace of linguistic heritage. At a time when many African urban areas are dominated by colonial or globalised naming systems, Maseru's Sesotho-based toponymy resists erasure of indigenous language. It reflects an assertion of Basotho identity, rooted in language, land, and lineage. Othengrafen (2023) clarifies that street names promote liveability and environmental footprint for generations to come. Names like Boiketlo ("comfort") and Bolepeletsa (possibly "ingenuity" or "creativity" in a metaphorical sense) express core cultural values. These are not merely poetic expressions; they function as public affirmations of what it means to live in a space that is Sesotho in essence.

7.3 Clanship and social structure

The incorporation of clan names such as Tloung, Phuthing, Rolong, and Taung reflects the enduring relevance of lineage and kinship systems within contemporary society. Clans are fundamental to Basotho identity, determining social roles, totemic affiliations, and relationships. Their presence in street names indicates that these systems are still influential enough to warrant public acknowledgement. This finding is corroborated by Gilbert (2010) and Moloi and Motsau (2011), which shows that language offers identity.

This aligns with the view of onomastic theory that names not only label but reflect and shape social realities. By mapping clans onto the cityscape, this study argues that Maseru reinforces social memory and maintains the symbolic geography of kinship and belonging.

7.4 Material culture and symbolism

The findings of this study also reveal that the area of Thetsane East, in particular, emphasises material culture through blanket names like Seanamarena, Lilala, Qibi, and Malakabe. These are more than household items; they are icons of cultural identity, as opined by Chabate (2012), and often worn with pride during ceremonies and rites of passage. Their inclusion in urban naming celebrates the visual and symbolic identity of the Basotho people. This affirms the theory that names serve a semiotic function (UNGEGN 2015, Mokala 2020): they are signs pointing to deeper cultural meanings. In this case, we argue that a street name that refers to a blanket serves as a metaphor for warmth, dignity, heritage, and status within the community.

7.5 Place names as pedagogical tools

Another key finding is the didactic function of street names. They act as everyday lessons in history, language, and environment. Names like Thaba-Bosiu and Qiloane teach about Basotho resistance and leadership, while plant names (Cheche, Morobehi, Monokotšoai) serve as informal ethnobotanical education. Even creativity-themed names, such as Boiketlo, found in this data set, encourage reflection on cultural values and practices of the Basotho. This aligns with ethnolinguistic perspectives that view language not only as communication but as a means of transmitting knowledge and cultural ethos across generations. These findings are also evident in the works of Matiza and Dube (2020), Jordan (2012), Guma (2001), Letsoela (2015), and Khanyetsi (2022), who also underscore the multi-layered role of names besides merely labelling.

8. CONCLUSION

The conclusions drawn from the findings are that the street names of Maseru offer a rich linguistic map of Basotho cultural heritage. Through the lens of ethnographic linguistic and onomastics, we see how language is used as a tool to preserve traditional knowledge, affirm identity, celebrate cultural pride, and embed historical consciousness into everyday space. Moreover, themes like chiefs, tradition, clans, and prominent figures show a deep respect for heritage and leadership, while names like Moshoeshoe,

Mohlomi, and Senate reflect historical or political importance. It is also conclusive that areas associated with birds, trees, rivers, and animals suggest a strong connection to the natural world (see Hillsview and Mohalalitoe, Maseru East). Maseru West leans toward historical and geographical features while Thamae stands out for linking plants and creativity, implying a possible artistic or symbolic identity.

The study also concludes that there is overlap of street names as illustrated on the table and graphics data presentations. For instance, Lerotholi appears in both Moshoeshoe 11 and Maseru West, which could suggest a broader influence or legacy. There are further instances of name duplication of plants and shrubs, such as Cheche, Mabelebele, and Mohloare found in Katlehong, Mohalalitoe, and Maseru East, perhaps indicating the importance of such names in Basotho culture and history. Generally, the study concludes that by converting oral, rural, and symbolic traditions into written urban signage, Maseru's street names act as living museums, sustaining Basotho culture in a changing modern landscape.

Based on the ethnographic and onomastic analysis of naming patterns across urban areas, the following recommendations are proposed to preserve, promote, and utilise cultural naming practices as part of heritage, education, and urban development initiatives.

The study recommends that cultural naming be integrated into urban planning and that the use of indigenous names, in Sesotho and other minority languages spoken in Lesotho, be continued for new streets and other public facilities. This may be enhanced by including the meaning, origin, or symbolism of the name to educate the youth and visitors. It is also recommended that the MCC establish a digital or physical archive of place names, which includes oral histories, meanings, and thematic groupings (trees, rivers, clans), as these will facilitate future naming activities and ensure standardisation.

This study further recommends fostering community involvement. Local communities may be engaged in naming projects through consultations or participatory mapping. In particular, the youth may be encouraged to participate in collecting and preserving names from older generations.

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THE LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE OF NAMING PRACTICES IN A SOUTHERN AFRICAN CITY: A CRITICAL TOPONYMIC ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Maseru, the capital city of the Kingdom of Lesotho, has seen changes in naming practices because of political changes. The country has also changed its flag more than once due to regime changes. This paper discusses the naming practices corresponding to the British colonial period and subsequent rule by Leabua Jonathan and other Basotho leaders. Strategic buildings, villages, and streets were given English names after events associated with the British. However, after independence, many new names were given in indigenous languages, especially Sesotho, the national and predominant language in Lesotho. Data used in this paper were gathered by purposive sampling, involving planned driving around Maseru to record both Sesotho and English toponyms visible on and from different roads. As Lesotho generally has limited signposts, additional names were collected from Google Maps, while memory and online resources were used to record some of the previous names used in Lesotho before the name changes discussed. The study is premised on Critical Toponymies Theory from a linguistic landscape perspective, and semiotics was used to interpret visual signs. Lastly, the paper acknowledges that place-naming is a continuous process which occurs in environments with overt and covert power dynamics.

Keywords: Colonialism, flags, Lesotho, naming practices, Sesotho

1. INTRODUCTION

Given the place-name changes in the Kingdom of Lesotho (Lesotho), some names have been eroded from the city's linguistic landscape. Maseru, the capital city of Lesotho, has seen changes in naming practices due to the changing politics of the day. Lesotho has also changed its flag more than once due to regime changes. For instance, when Chief Leabua Jonathan (Leabua) ruled Lesotho from 1966 to 1986, his party created a national flag based on his party colours. After toppling him, the army changed the national flag again, as the flag of the Basotho National Party (BNP) features blue, white, red, and green, which have meanings that are associated with the party and not necessarily with the country. The same colours can be seen on the old Lesotho flag, although in the national flag they were not arranged horizontally as on the BNP flag. The use of party colours to symbolise the Basotho nation may be interpreted as a sheer abuse of power by the then government, especially because Lesotho has never been a one-party state. Commenting on events leading up to the 1965 elections, Makoa (2005:61) says that Lesotho had three parties that were contesting the elections, namely the Basotho Congress Party (BCP), Basutoland National Party (BNP), and Marema-Tlou Freedom Party (MFP), reinforcing our stance that BNP's use of its party colours was a means of asserting its political power rather than of representing the whole nation after Lesotho regained its independence from colonial rule. The flag changes are observed in Figures 1 to 4 below:

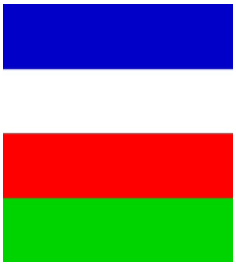

Figure 1: *Lesotho flag with the Basotho National Party colours (Source: Berry (2001))*

Figure 2: *Flag of Lesotho, 1966-1987 (Source: Berry (2001))*

Figure 3: *Flag of Lesotho, 1987 (Source: Berry (2001))*

Figure 4: *Flag of Lesotho, 1987 (Source: Wikimedia Commons (2024))*

As the flags above represent Lesotho's different political eras, the names discussed in this paper highlight the relationship between naming and renaming and political power in these different political eras. As Chilala and Hang'ombe (2020:84) observe, "there is no such thing as an innocent name, and even the presumption of 'neutral' names is a contested space". This relationship is not peculiar to Lesotho and has been recorded in many other countries in Africa and beyond (David 2013; Rusu 2021). If we interpret the changing of flags as symbolic to "renaming" or "re-identifying" the country as a result of power changes, then Lesotho was "renamed" twice after the initial flag in Figure 2 above.

Research on naming is often carried out through the lens of linguistics (morphology, phonology/phonetics, and semantics) (Klink 2000; González del Río *et al*. 2011). For instance, Mojapelo (2009) analyses the morphology and semantics of proper names in Northern Sotho, while Van Langendonck's (2007) work discusses the semantics of proper nouns. Tanaka (2023:1) traces studies of proper names from 1843 and comments that, "These studies, however, were mainly concerned with the semantics, (morpho)syntax,

and/or functional aspects of proper names". Their study focuses on the phonology of personal and place names. Whilst the field of onomastics studies proper names, this paper only focusses on toponyms as introduced above.

2. BACKGROUND

Lesotho can be considered to have had four major political eras, namely: Moshoeshoe's pre-colonial rule until 1868; colonial rule (1868–1966); Leabua's post-colonial rule (1966-1987); and lastly, the post-Leabua rule (1987–present). Each of these eras seems to have been characterised by unique naming practices in both private and public settings, possibly because of the different political agendas of the different bestowers of the names. The process of renaming may be influenced by social and demographic changes (Wu & Young 2023:1). For instance, during colonisation, which took place between the 1870s and 1966 (Maliehe 2022), the British government had the power to name and rename places in Lesotho. However, when Lesotho gained independence in 1966, the Basotho regained the power to affect changes, including through naming practices. It should be noted that Lesotho has not fully weaned itself from its allegiance to the British government, and as a result, in some instances, the spatial nomenclature of urban infrastructure continues to reflect the established patterns of strategic toponymy, maintaining a link to historically significant place names and the functional geography of the built environment it inherited from colonial rule.

It should also be noted that the British do not seem to have been interested in the development of Lesotho, hence Hirschmann (1987:459) says: "At independence there was one mile of paved road, and one spur of railway line and they both ran from the border post into Maseru". The apparent disinterest was glaring in the rural areas and justifies the position that the British generally named whatever was of value to them and left the rest of the toponyms to the Basotho to deal with. The lack or absence of development in the rural areas went hand in hand with the lack or absence of toponyms.

When the British gained control of Lesotho, they changed the country name to Basutoland in 1868 (Thabane 2023) as a sign of their political dominance over the rightful owners of the country. However, as soon as the Basotho regained independence in 1966, they renamed it to Lesotho as that was the correct and preferred name. The renaming signalled power shifts and represented the will of the people of Lesotho. Khati (2007) uses the toponym "Lesotho" to refer to both the pre- and post-colonial country, thereby indicating that *Lesotho* had always been the preferred toponym to the Basotho.

It is not clear why the Basotho did not rename many of the other geographic features that had been named or renamed by the British. This contemporary alliance suggests a pragmatic approach to international relations, wherein historical injustices are acknowledged yet do not impede diplomatic and socio-economic engagements. The resilience and adaptability demonstrated by the Basotho reflect broader themes of postcolonial reconciliation and the complexities of historical memory in shaping contemporary geopolitical affiliations.

One such example is the main government hospital, which was known as Queen Elizabeth II Hospital, and until 2020 had not had a name change, as is the case with many post-1994 place names in South Africa. What used to be known as King Edward VIII Hospital in Durban, South Africa, for example, has been renamed Victoria Mxenge Hospital (KZN Health 2024). However, as reported by the Government of Lesotho (Velaphe n.d.), Queen Elizabeth II Hospital in Lesotho has recently had a name change: "The construction of the Maseru District Hospital commonly known as Queen Elizabeth II Hospital is funded by the Government of the People's Republic of China". Similarly, Lancer's Road and Lancer's Inn Hotel in Maseru have not been renamed in the post-colonial era, despite the former being named by the British. In the latter case, the business name is associated with the odonym, Lancer's Road.

Analysing naming practices in Zanzibar, Myers (2009:85) asserts that "the social construction of space and place consists of a multifarious and ever-changing process of positioning oneself and others in the matrix of power relations, and not a spatial fixing of identities based solely on domination". Regarding street naming, the British were interested in Maseru West and Florida only because they lived in Maseru West. Apartments were built in Florida for civil servants, many of whom would have relocated to Maseru from other districts. Generally, the Basotho do not like living in apartments, however many government apartments were close to work and affordable to the civil servants who rented them and had homes away from the capital city. The Basotho live in *metse* ("villages"), which are usually named in Sesotho. However, the British named the areas which they occupied with non-Sesotho names. Most of them lived in what they called Maseru West and their staff were in Florida. Villages still carry colonial names and have many government properties occupied by civil servants. For instance, the State House, where the Prime Minister lives, is in Maseru West. Clearly, these toponyms were not named by the locals and represent the "other" people who occupied the land during colonialism. The following street names then came into being in the central business district, Maseru West or Florida.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

The paper employs Critical Toponymies Theory and semiotics to discuss the strategic names highlighted in this paper. The choice of frameworks is supported by the argument of Berg and Vuolteennaho (2009:9) that, "Given that naming a place is always a socially embedded act, one that involves power relations, the 'pure' linguistic standpoint remains inadequate for the critical study of toponymy". While it is important to highlight some of the linguistic features of the names under study, this paper cannot overlook their role in the political, cultural, and linguistic landscape of Lesotho. The linguistic landscape is understood to be the "visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region" (Laundry & Bourhis 1997:23). In addition, the linguistic landscape has been described as being "somewhere at the junction of sociolinguistics, sociology, social psychology, geography, and media studies" (Landry & Bourhis 1997:23), hence the need for theories which recognise the relevance of these disciplines in discussing social matters such as toponyms and odonyms. Moriarty (2002:20) comments that "Semiotics is the study of signs and signals, and sign processes". The ensemble of offline and online semiotic signs, such as printed signs, written signs, carved signs, sprayed signs, pictures, colours, logos, and graphs, constitutes the linguistic landscape of a given place. These semiotic signs include notice boards, traffic signs, billboards, shop windows, posters, flags, banners, graffiti, menus, and t-shirts (Rapeane-Mathonsi & Mathonsi 2022:27), which is why semiotics was used as one of the theories in this paper.

Studies of the linguistic landscapes of different cities fall under sociolinguistics and onomastics. Examples of such studies include Du Plessis (2011, 2012), Sarjälä (2025), and Helander (2015). In sociolinguistics, scholars generally study, among other things, how languages are used in multilingual societies. This is necessary because as identities evolve, linguistic landscapes adapt in response, as observed by Kotze and du Plessis (2010). Orthographic changes and renaming are done to give the languages spoken in a place visibility in the linguistic landscape. "The study of linguistic landscape aims to add another view to our knowledge about societal multilingualism by focusing on language choices, hierarchies of language, contact phenomena, regulations, and aspects of literacy" (Gorter 2013:191).

4. METHODOLOGY

Data used in this paper were gathered through purposive sampling, which involved planned driving around Maseru to record both Sesotho and English toponyms visible on and from different roads. Many toponyms are not visible on signposts in Lesotho

(Khotso & Chele 2020:96), making it difficult to collect data, as they do not form part of the visible linguistic landscape of the city. However, for a few street names of streets on which the author or their friends had lived as children, memory was used to record some of the previous names used in Lesotho before any name changes are discussed. Additional names were collected from Google Earth on the advice of the Maseru City Council staff member who reported that the city had run out of the latest map of Maseru with street names. This sampling was done in order to establish whether and why there had been changes in the naming practices in the city of Maseru. The collected names were then classified according to their types and analysed. Given that the data was collected qualitatively, they were analysed qualitatively.

Maseru is a relatively small city, covering an area of 138 km^2 (Romaya & Brown 1999, citing Physical Planning Division 1989a, 1990a). A total of 19 toponyms were collected through planned drives, five from Google Earth. In addition, two names were added from memory (the researcher's), as they were not indicated on signposts nor could the Maseru City Council, the entity responsible for managing the city, provide the necessary information. Because of the size of the city and the limited number of relevant toponyms available, those two names could not be omitted. It is worth noting that Lesotho does not have an official body dedicated to naming toponyms, such as the South African Geographic Names Council in South Africa. The absence of such a regulatory institution means that work on toponyms can be challenging, as there are no formal guidelines that standardise or provide oversight for the naming process.

5. RESULTS ON RENAMING

After independence in 1966, Lesotho embarked on a renaming exercise and renamed some of the names from the British era, mainly because of their national importance. The names concerned are listed in Table 1:

Tabel 1: *Post-independence name changes*

Sesotho name	Colonial name	Corrected name
Basotho	Bassuto	Basotho
Lesotho	Basutoland	Lesotho
Moshoeshoe	Moshesh	Moshoeshoe

"Basotho" is the collective name of the people of the country Lesotho; its singular is "Mosotho". The name is found in some literature as "Bassuto". The country was also

known as "Basutoland" during colonial rule (Swallow, Mokitimi, & Brokken 1986). Similarly, the name of the first king of the Basotho nation, King Moshoeshoe I, appears in early literature as Moshesh and was later corrected to Moshoeshoe in post-independence literature (Richards 1961). The study could not establish why these changes existed in the first place and can only assume that all three changes were a result of choices made to suit the French orthography which was later revised after independence.

It is not hard to understand why it was important for the Basotho to change the names above in written texts and in the linguistic landscape of the country. Place names are carriers of meaning and intent, making it unacceptable for them to be changed by the powers that be. "The connection between names and identity does not only affect people. Names and naming also constitute an important part of the work of the building of a nation" (Windt-Val 2012:275).

Basotho is the name of the nation that was formed by King Moshoeshoe I, and it could not be changed at random because Lesotho was now under British rule. The same argument is relevant for changes to the king's name from Moshoeshoe to Moshesh and to the country from Lesotho to Basotuland. The practice of renaming countries is not peculiar to Lesotho but has been seen in other countries too. For instance, in 2018 the Kingdom of Swaziland was renamed the Kingdom of Eswatini. Similarly, the orthography of a country that the world had for a long time known as "Turkey" was revised to "Türkiye" in April 2021 (Dinçer 2022).

There follows below a discussion of the toponyms collected from around the city of Maseru, which show it to be a city that has experienced three different administrative eras.

Maseru is a small city and as a result does not have many toponyms. In addition, because of the current lack of coordination of toponymic naming practices in the city and the country at large, some of the streets in the many villages of Maseru do not have toponyms. For a long time, this practice has made it difficult to carry out research on some of the focus areas that are researched in countries with street names and visible signage.

This section discusses toponyms found in the Maseru central business district (CBD) and suburbs surrounding it and argues that while many of them are not Sesotho, the country's most popular language, they could have been in that language if the namer had so wished.

Table 2: *Non-Sesotho toponyms in Maseru CBD and surrounding suburbs*

Toponym	Location	Sesotho equivalent	Geographic feature
Caledon	Maseru West	Mohokare	Street name
Caledon	Border of Lesotho and South Africa	Mohokare	River
Constitution	Maseru West	Molao-Theo	Street name
Hammerskjold	Florida	n/a	Street name
Lancer's Road	CBD	n/a	Street name
Lancer's Gap	Sehlabeng	Sehlabeng	Village name
Mabille Road	Hills View	n/a	Street name
Orpen Road	Old Europa	n/a	Street name
Pioneer Road	CBD	Pulamaliboho	Street name
Pioneer Mall	CBD	Pulamaliboho Mall	Mall name
Old Europa	Near CBD	N/A	Suburb name

The toponyms above were collected in the CBD and suburbs close to the CBD of Maseru. Many of the examples provided above are odonyms, with a few names covering other toponyms which will be discussed below. The information provided in the table includes the toponym itself, its location, and the type of geographical feature it is; and where a Sesotho equivalent exists, it is provided. Caledon appeared as two toponyms, first as an odonym and a river name. The river "Mohokare" is also called "Caledon", as in Makara's (2013) work. Similarly, Caledon is one of the odonyms in Maseru West, a suburb in Maseru. This means that it is possible for the Sesotho toponym to be used exclusively to highlight the language that the majority of Basotho speak as their home language in Lesotho. Mosotho (2023:27) notes that 85% of the 2.3 million people who live in Lesotho speak Sesotho as their mother tongue. This makes Sesotho the most popular language in Lesotho. Constitution Road is found in Maseru West, which used to be the main area for British civil servants and continues to have a significant number of civil servants. For instance, the Prime Minister's residence is in Maseru West. However, this location could have been given a Sesotho toponym, in line with the country's naming patterns. Since Lesotho lacks a body that is responsible for geographical names, it is not possible to refer to the naming guidelines followed when naming toponyms in this country.

The second odonym, Hammarskjold, in Florida, Maseru, was presumably named after the Swedish Dag Hammarskold, the Secretary-General of the UN from 1953 until 1961, (UN, n.d). We observe that the odonym could have had a Sesotho name, as it is the language

spoken by the majority of the speakers in Lesotho. Lancers Road, a street in the heart of the CBD, which is presumable named after the British Lancer regiments who were stationed in Lesotho during the British rule (Lancers Inn, n.d.). Any physical or social features associated with Maseru could have been used to name or rename the road, as is commonplace in the few names seen in Maseru and the rest of the country.

It should be noted that there are still many villages and suburbs which do not have odonyms in modern day Lesotho. They include, but are not limited to: Ha Matala, Thabong, Upper Thamae and Qoaling.

On the other hand, the odonym "Mabille Road" was named after the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society missionary Rev. Adolphe Mabille, who was also a Sesotho dictionary author (Kunene 2014). Similarly, "Orpen Road" was named to honour Joseph Orpen, a British Resident in Nomansland who was responsible for some of the work done by the British government in Lesotho during Moshoeshoe's rein (Mitchell & Challis 2008). Pioneer Road is said to have been named after the so-called British "pioneers" who lived in Lesotho during colonisation. However, any relevant Sesotho odonym could be used to name or rename the road. In addition, Pioneer Mall is on Pioneer Road and consequently named after it to highlight its location in the city of Maseru. Lastly, the suburb called New Europa, which is less than a kilometre from Pioneer Mall, is named after "Europe", perhaps because many of the early civil servants of European descent lived in this area, which was close to government offices and other strategic infrastructure.

The examples above highlight that in terms of naming in Maseru, colonisation did not really end when independence was attained as these foreign toponyms are still an important part of the linguistic and cultural landscape of Lesotho.

Confirming the tendency of retaining names from the colonial past for many years, the Basotho continued to use English names to name their businesses and Christian names to name their children. One of the oldest pharmacies in Maseru, Husteds Pharmacy, was established by a Mosotho nurse from the Queen Elizabeth II Hospital and her family. Similarly, when the Lesotho Government established hotels in different areas, it gave English names to many of them, including, Airport Hotel, next to Leabua Airport (former airport name); Golden Egg (found in Maseru Border), and Victoria Hotel, found on Leabua Highway (former road name).

In Lesotho, land belongs to the king and many villages are overseen by chiefs, whose names are usually in Sesotho or Sotho-ised (transliterated) versions of European languages. However, during colonial rule the naming of many villages in Maseru did not

follow this practice and therefore the names of these villages did not exhibit the chiefs' relevance to the land as is usually the practice. Many of the villages in Maseru which were occupied by the European population and/or their civil servants, as highlighted in Table 3 below, were the ones that acquired non-Sesotho names. They included Maseru West, Florida, White City, Old Europa, Hills View, and others.

The city of Maseru is divided into suburbs, particularly around the central business district (CBD). However, in areas farther from the CBD, traditional leadership plays a significant role in governance, with chiefs overseeing villages. These villages are often named after the chiefs themselves, using their anthroponyms. The villages were initially governed by the chiefs and later by their descendants, continuing a long-standing tradition in Sesotho naming practices.

Beyond personal names, some villages derive their names from geographic features or other key landmarks. For instance, Ha Sempe translates to "the village that belongs to Sempe", following the custom of naming villages after their founders. An example of naming based on geographic significance is Thaba-Bosiu, which means "a mountain that grew at night". This historical site was King Moshoeshoe's fortress during times of war. According to Sesotho belief, the mountain's appearance changed at night, growing taller to protect Moshoeshoe and his people from enemy attacks.

Table 3: *Maseru village and suburb names*

Structure of village names showing jurisdiction	English equivalent	Non-Sesotho village names (jurisdiction not clear)
Ha Matala	Chief Matala's village	Florida
Ha Thamae	Chief Thamae's village	Hills View
Ha Thetsane	Chief Thetsane's village	Maseru West
Ha Maama	Chief Maama's village	New Europa
Ha 'Nelese	Chief 'Nelese's village	Old Europa

Although some villages retained their colonial names, many new villages and/or suburbs were given Sesotho names. It must be noted that the second set of villages above are mainly near the CBD and continue to attract elite residents, comprising Basotho and foreign residents. However, Ha Thetsane has managed to attract many Basotho and a fair number of diplomats based in Lesotho while retaining its Sesotho name. The village is one of the prime areas in Lesotho, despite its name, indicating that it is not necessarily a foreign name that makes an area prime.

During colonial rule and the early years after independence, many strategic government infrastructures bore English names; however, the practice is changing.

In this section, names for strategic government buildings in the city of Maseru and how they have changed over time are analysed. The first name is "Basotho Hat". This is a historical landmark and the national symbol of Lesotho which resembles the traditional Basotho hat, *mokokorotlo*, and is found in the CBD. Its formal name is "Basotho Hat", but it has since acquired a Sesotho name, "Mokorotlong", which means "a structure which looks like the mokorotlo hat". The main Maseru Post Office was for a long time known as "Post Office", but has been named "Moposo House". Moposo is the Sesotho equivalent for "postman". Another popular name is that of the Lesotho Agricultural College, which is fondly called "Temong"/"Sekolo se Seholo sa Temo" in Sesotho. The two Sesotho names mean "place of agriculture", and are the preferred names, although they co-exist alongside their English equivalent. Lastly, the current Government Printing was established pre-independence, in 1960, and known as "Government Printing", (Foko 2000, citing Willet & Ambrose 1980). It is now fondly known as "Khatisong", literally meaning, "the place of publishing/printing". The last name, Qhobosheaneng, means "fortress", perhaps in recognition of Thaba-Bosiu, King Moshoeshoe's fortress. It is a complex built after independence to house some of the government's offices.

5.1 Naming during Leabua Jonathan's rule

The Basotho National Party (BNP), which became the first post-colonial government, was led by Leabua Jonathan. Leabua named some places after himself and/or his family. The following names are examples of strategic names that came from his era.

Leabua Highway

This was the odonym for the main road in Maseru. It leads to the palace and the CBD. When Leabua named it there were many befitting eponymic names that his government could have used had their intention been to honour key figures in Lesotho's history. King Moshoeshoe I's name is a typical example as well as the names of any member of his large family. As Wakumelo *et al*. (2016:270) argue, "odonyms are not just mere signposts. Street names may be given to reflect the social, political, and cultural ideologies maintained by the name-givers". This observation supports the assertion that Leabua chose the odonym in this instance to extend his authoritarian rule to the naming of the streets of Maseru. Under normal circumstances, rulers do not usually name toponyms

after themselves. It is the responsibility of those who may choose to honour them to do so – and generally when they are no longer in power.

Leabua Jonathan Airport

The airport is in Maseru and was then the main airport for many years. It is obvious that Leabua named the airport after himself rather than after any of the other Mosotho who deserved to be honoured.

'Mantahli Old Age Home

This was one of the few old age homes in Maseru and Lesotho. 'Mantahli was Leabua's wife, and the home was named after her as a way of asserting his dominance over the Basotho.

5.2 Lekhanya's military rule (1986–1991)

Colonel Metsing Lekhanya overthrew Leabua in 1986 and Lesotho consequently came under military rule. His government effected name changes, especially of those associated with Leabua. This new trend might have been motivated by the fact that, unlike colonial names which affected almost all Basotho in a similar manner, some of the names given by Leabua were eponyms created to glorify and immortalise him. In addition, these names were supposed to appeal to BNP supporters, and by the time he was toppled, he was not as popular as he once was and the names were no longer desirable to the majority of the Basotho. The changes are highlighted below:

Table 4: *Prime Minister Leabua Jonathan and Major General Metsing Lekhanya's Toponyms*

Leabua	Post-Leabua
Leabua Highway	Kingsway
Leabua Jonathan Airport	Mejametalana Airport
'Mantahli Old Age Home	Old Age Home (Lehae la Maqheku)

The first odonym above was named Leabua Highway during Prime Minister Leabua Jonathan's reign. It is the name of the street that leads to the palace in Maseru and is of significance to all Basotho and not only BNP supporters. In addition, it is the main street in the city. The Mejametalana Airport was initially named Leabua Jonathan Airport. Mejametalana is one of the original names of the city of Maseru. The airport was never

the private property of Leabua and his family or supporters; it belonged to the country, hence the name change. It is now used as one of the bases of the Lesotho Defence Force. Lastly, one of the few old age homes in Maseru was named 'Mantahli Old Age Home after Leabua Jonathan's wife, 'Mantahli Jonathan. It is now known as Old Age Home without reference to anyone's name. Removing Leabua's wife's name created a sense of ownership for all Basotho and not just Leabua's wife and his supporters, especially because Lesotho has a dire shortage of homes for the elderly.

6. CONCLUSION

The research did not find evidence of formal name replacements when British colonialism gave way to Basotho rule. Rather, a trend of changing the namescape from English to Sesotho was observed from the new Sesotho names. Sesotho subsequently became visible almost everywhere in Lesotho, from public to private infrastructures, turning Lesotho's linguistic landscape predominantly Sesotho. Generally, the Basotho is a peace-loving nation, hence the greeting, "Khotso, Pula, Nala" (Peace, Rain, Prosperity), and seem to have extended this peace-loving spirit to limiting significant renaming of old British toponyms in Lesotho. However, between the rivals Leabua and Lekhanya, there were noticeable place-name replacements. In the absence of an official place-name authority, the place-namescape is responsive to the decisions of those with name-giving authority. As such, this study is a reflection of place names as entities that reflect covert and overt power dynamics. The observed trend of turning to naming in Sesotho is a clear indication of an established if informal naming practice. These new naming practices in Lesotho will ensure the sustainability of Sesotho language and culture.

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SLOVENIAN MICROTOPONYMS IN THE BILINGUAL AREA IN HUNGARY

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ABSTRACT

Geographical names are an important part of the cultural heritage of every nation. They are a fundamental building block of all civilisations or cultures, filling space with meaning and developing spatial identities. Geographical names in languages with few speakers, such as Slovenian, are often endangered, but this is even truer of the geographical names of ethnic minorities, including the Slovenians of Hungary, the smallest cross-border Slovenian minority. The far western edge of Hungary, which lies between Slovenia and Austria, is called the Rába Valley. It includes seven settlements in which bilingualism is officially present. An outward sign of this bilingualism is bilingual road signs with the names of settlements. The main subject of this research was microtoponyms. One of the results of the research is a map with a glossary based on extensive fieldwork and a review of archival sources. It is primarily intended for the general public. It is hoped that it will help preserve these microtoponyms in people's memories and at the same time promote their everyday use in communication.

Keywords: Bilingualism, cultural heritage, ethnic minorities, microtoponyms

1. INTRODUCTION

Ensuring the preservation of intangible cultural heritage is an important task for researchers. An inseparable part of intangible heritage is language, which includes geographical names. See Figure 1 below as an example of a multilingual road sign as an external indication of the presence of multilingualism in the Rába Valley; place names in Hungarian, German, and Slovenian follow one another from top to bottom. Because of various processes, these names are especially endangered in cross-border areas, and so their examination in such areas deserves special attention. The smallest ethnic Slovenian cross-border community lives in western Hungary, in Vas County (Hung. *Vas vármegye*, Sln. *Železna županija*). According to the last census, conducted in 2022, 3,965 Hungarian citizens declare themselves ethnic Slovenians, or a third more than in the 2011 census, but the number of Slovenian native speakers declined. Only 1,547 residents declared themselves native Slovenian speakers, compared to 1,723 in 2011.

Figure 1: *Multilingual road sign (Hungarian, German, and Slovenian) in the Rába Valley (Source: Matjaž Geršič)*

1.1 Slovenians in the Rába Valley

In Hungary, ethnic Slovenians live close to one another in seven officially bilingual settlements in the ethnically Slovenian part of the Rába Valley. In the 2022 census, approximately 1,650 people there identified themselves as ethnic Slovenians. As attested, the Slavs first settled in the area between the Mura and Rába rivers in the ninth century (Olas 1995). In the eleventh century, the Rába Valley was covered in forests and swamps, and it was sparsely populated. In 1183, Béla III of Hungary established a Cistercian monastery dedicated to Saint Gotthart, a medieval saint that the town of Szentgotthárd (Germ. *Sankt Gotthard*, Sln. *Monošter*) was named after. To farm their land, the Cistercians required labour, which at that time was composed of local Slovenians and those that moved there from elsewhere. They formed settlements in the abbey area, some of which have survived until today (Kozar-Mukič 1984). Rábatótfalu (Sln. *Slovenska ves*) was the first settlement attested in written records (as *Villa Sclavorum*), as early as 1221 (Zelko 1996; Bajzek Lukač 2017). Until 1918, when the First World War ended, the Rába Valley Slovenians were politically, administratively, culturally, and economically united with the Prekmurje Slovenians in a single Hungarian state (Olas 1995). After the end of the war, a new border between the newly established states of Hungary and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was defined at the Paris Peace Conference. However, that was not an ethnic border, but it ran along a watershed (Fujs 1992). This delimitation loosened and severed the already well-established ties between the Rába Valley, which became part of Hungary, and the Mura Valley, which belonged to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. According to the Hungarian data of 1920, at that time the Rába Valley had 6,087 ethnic Slovenian residents and Prekmurje had 14,413 ethnic Hungarian residents (Fujs 1992). Contacts with the Rába Valley Slovenians continued to be unhindered and direct up until the 1948 Cominform Resolution, when Hungary also erected a barbed wire fence and built minefields, fire trenches, and watchtowers along the border with Yugoslavia, including the 102 km section that is now the Slovenian border. The Rába Valley Slovenians, who showed an affinity with Slovenia, began to be persecuted (Čačinovič 1992) and contacts between the ethnic Slovenians on both sides of the border further deteriorated. The situation slightly improved after 1964, but it was not until the fall of the Iron Curtain and Slovenia's independence from Yugoslavia in 1991 that there were no longer any major obstacles to crossing the border. All of this also had an impact on the use of Slovenian in the Rába Valley. Figure 2 below shows the official Slovenian-Hungarian bilingual area in Hungary, with the bilingual settlements shown in Figure 3.

Figure 2: *The official Slovenian-Hungarian bilingual area in Hungary (Source: ZRC SAZU Anton Melik Geographical Institute)*

Figure 3: *Bilingual Slovenian-Hungarian settlements in Hungary (Source: ZRC SAZU Anton Melik Geographical Institute)*

1.2 Microtoponyms

Microtoponyms (Sln. *ledinska imena*, from *ledina*, see below) are the names of small uninhabited areas (Snoj 2009) that refer to the basic characteristics and properties of village land (Kladnik 1999) and share the destiny of the Slovenian language in the Rába Valley. In addition to the declining use of Slovenian, they are also threatened by

agricultural modernisation. Their scholarly analysis is the only solution for preserving them, along with appropriate dissemination of findings to the professional community and the general public.

The Slovenian term *ledina* initially referred to a compact piece of land with the same land use, such as a meadow, pasture, field, or orchard (Jarc 2004). Such parcels formed as a result of changes in the clan and tribal society in the early stage of Slovenian ethnogenesis (Fabčič 2010). Larger pieces of such land were divided into smaller ones due to changes in farming (e.g., the introduction of manuring and crop rotation) and various social processes, such as inheritance, sale, and expropriation, whereby individual segments could obtain their own names.

The word *ledina* is derived from the Indo-European root $*lend^h$-, which means "vacant or uncultivated land". Words with this root in other European countries also designate a clearing in a forest, stubble field, fallow land, steppe, territory, land, barren landscape, or valley (Snoj 1997:296). Microtoponyms designate the basic characteristics and properties of village land (Kladnik 1999). The division of the village space into these microlocations derives from the permanent collective conceptions of the natural division of space. The boundaries between these individual pieces of land are often natural divides, such as riverbeds, foothills, terrace scarps, transitions in slopes, or ridges. These units of land thus express the basic characteristics of the natural environment and all human alterations to it created to improve these characteristics (Penko Seidl 2011). Most of these microlocations were named by locals and some by surveyors that performed the measurements for the land cadastre (Ribnikar 1982). In turn, some microtoponyms are nothing but general geographical terms adapted to a specific geographical characteristic, with their spelling indicating a proper noun (Fabčič 2010). Due to contemporary processes leading to changes in the countryside, a microlocation may no longer have a single land-use category. Thus, it may no longer mean what it originally did, but locals still perceive it as a whole, even though its land use is now varied. Even though the names may no longer reflect the original characteristics of these locations, they have nonetheless remained the same (Penko Seidl 2011). In the Habsburg Monarchy, microtoponyms were first systematically recorded on the Franciscan cadastre maps. In the Habsburg hereditary lands, these maps were produced from 1818 to 1828, and in Hungary they began to be produced from 1850 onward (Kladnik 1999); before that, they had only been preserved through oral tradition (Fabčič 2010).

However, an irreplaceable source, especially for establishing the current use of microtoponyms and their dialect versions, is local informants. The best informants are the elderly because they are familiar with both the local living environment and the lifestyle there. Usually, the best information can be obtained from farmers, forest workers, hunters, and fishermen (Klinar *et al*. 2012). A great challenge in collecting microtoponyms has to do with recording and standardising them because the informants provide them in the local dialect. Even though microtoponyms are limited to a specific territorial community with its own collective memory, their heritage significance makes it vital to also preserve them in writing. Writing these memories down is the only way to prevent these names from sinking into oblivion (Halbwachs 2001). Microtoponyms can be recorded in several ways. They are most frequently recorded on maps, preferably in combination with an accompanying text providing additional explanations. Such maps can also be produced and made available online, where an audio recording of dialect pronunciation can be added to the microtoponym, along with explanatory photos and other material. In the Hungarian part of the Habsburg Monarchy, microtoponyms were common not only in the ethnic Slovenian areas of the Rába Valley, as in the case of oeconyms. Their special feature is that many of them reflect the Slovenian language.

1.3 The Rába Valley subdialects of the Prekmurje dialect

Slovenian has nearly forty dialects and countless subdialects, making it the Slavic language with the most dialect differentiation and one of the most dialect-rich languages in Europe, especially given that there are relatively few speakers in of the language in Europe (about two million) covering a small geographic area (Logar 1996). Many factors contributed to the long process whereby Slovenian split into dialects and dialect groups (Logar 1996; Toporišič 1998). In terms of dialect classification—which, based on more recent language development, divides the Prekmurje dialect internally into the Dolinsko, Ravensko, and Goričko (literally lowland, flatland, and highland) subdialects—the local Rába Valley dialects belong to the Goričko subdialect of the Prekmurje dialect in the Pannonian dialect group. They are spoken in the following eight villages in the Rába Valley: Felsőszölnök (Sln. *Gornji Senik*), Alsószölnök (Sln. *Dolnji Senik*), Kétvölgy (Sln. *Verica–Ritkarovci*), Orfalu (Sln. *Andovci*), Szakonyfalu (Sln. *Sakalovci*), Rábatófalu (Sln. *Slovenska ves*), Apátistvánfalva (Sln. *Števanovci*), and Újbalázsfalva (Sln. *Otkovci*; though administratively, this village is actually part of Apátistvánfalva). In terms of the distinguishing linguistic features and the historical and administrative division of the Rába Valley, the subdialects can be divided into two groups that differ from one another primarily in terms of the development of their vowels and consonants. The

two groups are the local Felsőszölnök dialect, spoken in the villages of Felsőszölnök (Sln. *Gornji Senik*), Alsószölnök (Sln. *Dolnji Senik*), and Kétvölgy (Sln. *Verica–Ritkarovci*), and the local Apátistvánfalva dialect, spoken in the villages of Apátistvánfalva (Sln. *Števanovci*), Újbalázsfalva (Sln. *Otkovci*), Kétvölgy (Sln. *Verica–Ritkarovci*), Orfalu (Sln. *Andovci*), Szakonyfalu (Sln. *Sakalovci*), and Rábatófalu (Sln. *Slovenska ves*).

1.4 Research questions

The aim of this study is to investigate how microtoponyms function as part of the intangible cultural heritage of the Slovene minority in Hungary. To this end, the study addresses several key questions arising from the theoretical concepts of language and identity, collective memory and cultural landscape. The following research questions were formulated:

1) What is the linguistic composition of microtoponyms in the Rába Valley, and how does it vary between settlements?
2) To what extent do Slovenian microtoponyms still survive in local language use?
3) What naming patterns and semantic motivations underlie the microtoponyms recorded in the Slovene-speaking settlements of the Rába Valley?
4) How do the microtoponyms reflect the historical land use, ownership, and ecological characteristics of the area?
5) How is the multilingual character of the Rába Valley expressed in the microtoponymic landscape, and what does this reveal about past and present inter-ethnic relations?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based on interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives that combine sociolinguistics, toponymy, collective memory studies, and minority identity formation. The theoretical framework is based on three main strands: (1) language and identity in borderlands, (2) microtoponymy as an expression of cultural landscape, and (3) collective memory and place attachment.

2.1 Language and identity in border areas

Language serves not only as a tool of communication but also as a symbolic marker of ethnic identity, especially in border regions where different national, linguistic, and cultural influences overlap. As Fishman (1999) and Edwards (2009) argue, minority languages are central to the self-perception of their speakers and play a crucial role in

maintaining community cohesion. In the case of the Rába Valley, the retention, or erosion, of Slovene reflects broader processes of assimilation, language shift, and national policy towards minorities. The idea of the linguistic landscape (Landry & Bourhis 1997) is also relevant here, especially in the context of bilingual settlements and their toponymy. The public display of place names in minority languages can be interpreted as an assertion of linguistic rights and identity, especially in border areas (Gorter 2006).

2.2 Microtoponymy and the cultural landscape

Toponyms are part of what Tuan (1977) calls topophilia – the affective bond between people and places. Microtoponyms, as discussed by Kladnik (1999) and Fabčič (2010), are primarily associated with local collective knowledge and oral traditions and encode ecological, economic, and historical dimensions of the landscape. As such, they form an essential part of a community's intangible cultural heritage. The theoretical basis for the study of microtoponyms comes from ethnolinguistics and cultural geography. They are regarded as "linguistic fossils" (Radding 2006), often preserving historical land use practices, property relations, and even mythological or religious associations. Their gradual disappearance is therefore not merely a linguistic phenomenon but a form of cultural loss.

2.3 Collective memory and spatial identity

The concept of collective memory, as developed by Maurice Halbwachs (2001), offers an important perspective on how communities remember and reproduce knowledge about space. Microtoponyms are remembered and transmitted through oral narratives between generations, often by elders familiar with traditional land use (Klinar *et al*. 2012). Nora (1989) distinguishes between *milieux de mémoire* (memory environments) and *lieux de mémoire* (memory places), and microtoponyms can be interpreted as both: they are embedded in everyday life and at the same time serve as mnemonic anchors. This perspective is in line with current efforts to preserve the cultural heritage of minorities through documentation, mapping, and public dissemination. The act of recording and visualising microtoponyms, especially in dialectal form, can be understood as a strategy of resistance against cultural erasure as well as a way of strengthening community identity in a transnational context.

3. METHODS

Because the borders of the settlements in the Rába Valley, as known at present, have slightly changed through history, this study focused on the area covering seven cadastral districts from the second half of the eighteenth century. This area largely overlaps with that of contemporary settlements; the greatest difference may be observed in Szentgotthárd (Sln. *Monošter*), where only the hamlet of Rábatófalu (Sln. *Slovenska ves*), which was an independent settlement until 1983, was included in the study. Research comprised deskwork and fieldwork. The first stage of the desk research was based on archival sources, and it resulted in a field map, which was used in the fieldwork with the informants. The basic archival sources used were maps. The oldest source containing microtoponyms is Austria-Hungary's land cadastre, which, for the cadastral districts examined, was produced between 1857 and 1858. The land cadastre maps are georeferenced and freely available online, but they cannot be imported into a local geographic information system. The second-oldest source used was the maps produced as part of the military survey conducted between 1927 and 1931. These maps were first digitised and then georeferenced. Microtoponyms from various sources, including from field research, are collected in the volume *Vas megye* (Vas County; Balogh *et al*. 1982). The text contains maps, which were also digitised and geo-referenced. The only vector data used were the 1998 data at a 1:10,000 scale provided by the Hungarian Surveying and Mapping Authority. The microtoponyms from all these sources were transferred onto an integral large-format field map, separately for each settlement. These maps, along with the gazetteers produced, formed the basis for field research. The representatives of the Slovenian minority in the Rába Valley arranged for us to meet with the locals in each settlement, so we could review the collected names together, determine whether the locals knew or used them, and ascertain whether they knew which locations they referred to and what they meant (see Figure 4 below). All these conversations were also tape-recorded. A total of seven meetings were held, and interviews were conducted with sixteen individuals. Seven of the interviewees were men and nine were women. The interviewees were selected by Mr Martin Ropoš, an excellent expert on the local environment, long-time mayor of Felsőszölnök (Sln. *Gornji Senik*), and long-time chairman of the Slovenian National Self-Government in Hungary. All interviewees were over 50 years old and had different professions, including forester, journalist, farmer, local politician, and teacher at a bilingual school.

Figure 4: *One of the meetings with locals in the Rába Valley (Source: Matjaž Geršič)*

The third stage of research again involved deskwork, as part of which the data were organised and analysed and material was prepared for dissemination and publication. Each name was recorded in three ways: in broad phonetic transcription, narrow phonetic transcription, and standardised transcription. The following principles of broad phonetic transcription were used:

- The stress position is indicated with an acute (*é*), grave (*è*), or circumflex (*ê*) (e.g., *Cirék*, *Cèsta*, and *Bêrek*).
- The length and quality of a stressed vowel: the symbol *ò* indicates short close /o/ (*Gospòčko*, *Vèlka šònžet*), and the symbol *è* indicates short close /e/ (*Jèlica*).
- The circumflex indicates short open /ɛ/, thus allowing a distinction between short close *è* /e/ and short open *ê* /ɛ/ (*Čètinje* vs. *Bêgnjec*).
- The macron indicates posttonic length in Hungarian names (e.g., *Fèrčān pùsta*, *Màgjorōš*).
- Syncopated vowels are not written (*Sőverca* = *Severica*, *Ciglénca* = *Ciglenica*).
- Long diphthongs are written as *ej* and *au* (*Bréjg*, *Potáučec*).
- In the local Apátistvánfalva subdialect, the short diphthongs *ie* and *uo* are transcribed as *è* (*Pèterin bréjg*, *Cèsta*) and *ò* (*Slovènski pòtok*).
- The labialised mid-front vowel is transcribed as *ö* (*Bȍrgölin*).
- The labialised high-front vowel is transcribed as *ü* (*Lasìcina lȕknja*).
- Dialect consonant developments are transcribed as follows: *kj* (*Grájkje*), *ml* (*mn*) (*Kàmlovo*), *tj* (< *k*) (*Gláftje*, *Cèrtjef*), except in *Jarek* (and all word combinations with this base), which is transcribed as *Jarek* and *Djárek*, as agreed between the

informants and transcribers (the informants did not agree with the phonetic transcription (*Djárek*) of this word).

- Devoiced consonants at the end of a word are written as their voiced counterparts (*Mijálin bréjg* instead of *Mijálin bréjk*, *Žmìtin kríž*, except for *Tréjbeš* (and not *Tréjbež*), which is justified by the oblique case forms *Na Trbešé* → *Na Trebeše*).
- The devoicing *v* > *f* before voiceless consonants is transcribed in all positions (*Léjskofca*, *Cèrtjef*).
- Accentual or morphological doublets are separated by a slash (*Gàbergje*/*Gábergje*).
- The first non-prepositional component of the name is capitalised: *Pri Bȑvi*.

The characteristics of the standardised transcription of the collected microtoponyms:

- Standardised transcription of dialect diphthongs: *au* → *o* (*Potáučec* → *Potočec*), *ej* → *e* (*Kováčin bréjg* → *Kovačin breg*), *ij* → *i* (*Gičíjna* → *Gičina*), *ie* → *e* ('*Cielinå* → *Cèlina* → *Celina*).
- Standardised transcription of the dialect reflex for pretonic *i*: 1. (< *u*): *Cirék* → *Curek*, *Bikáuvčica* → *Bukovčica*, and 2. (< e): *Cimènt* > *Cement*.
- Standardised transcription of the dialect reflex for *ə*: 1. in the suffix *-əc* > *-ac* → *-ec* (*Doléjnji kònac* > *Dolenji konec*, *Léjskovac* > *Leskovec*); 2. in the middle of the word (*Vèška páut* → *Vaška pot*).
- Standardised transcription of the dialect phoneme *ü* → *u* (*Mùzga* → *Muzga*), except if the name is of Hungarian origin (*Šȕrü êrdö* → *Šürü erdö*).
- Preserving the letter *ö*, which is generally standardised as *e* (*Sővarca* → *Severica*), if the microtoponym is related to an oeconym (*Köleš breg*) or if it is of Hungarian origin (*Čiga föld*);
- Reconstructing syncopated or lost phonemes: 1. *i*: *Ciglénca* → *Ciglenica*, *Tȑnovca* → *Trnovica*; 2. *ə*: *Ròne* → *Ronec*; 3. *h*: *Vŕnji bréjg* → *Vrhnji breg*, 4. *v*: *Gròfosko* → *Grofovsko*, 5. *-lj*: *Stávlanca* → *Stavljanica*.
- Standardising dialect consonant developments: *gj* → *j* (*Bréjzgje* → *Brezje*), *dj* → *j* (*Djárak* → *Jarek*, *Bréjždje* → *Brezje*), *ml* → *mn* (*Kamnovje*, *Na Kamnu*), *šk* → *šč* (*Mála gáuška* > *Mala gošča*); omitting the cluster *čr* (*Črèšnjica* → *Češnjica*), the pleophony *-ere-* (*Čèreta* → *Čreta*), and the cluster *kl* < *tl* (*Bìnkli* → *Bintli*).
- Standardising dialect final *-n* < *-m* (*Pod žlàkon* → *Pod žlakom*).
- Standardising *u*: 1. (< *ol*) (*Dúga zèmla* → *Dolga zemlja*); 2. > *vi* (*Rábina vìlica* → *Rabina ulica*).
- Reconstructing the cluster *vi* (> *j*) (*Lìpojca* → *Lipovica*, *Ridjàjca* → *Rjavica*).

- Reconstructing the cluster *-čko* < *-sko* (*Gospòčko* → *Gosposko*).
- Reconstructing *h* (*Vȑnja grájka* → *Vrhnja grajka*, *Podràstek* → *Podhrastek*).
- Standardising dialect adjectival endings (*Na Sòlskom* → *Na Solskem*).
- Names with an unclear etymology are only standardised phonetically (*Gȕščin ograd* → *Güščin ograd*), *Malȕj* → *Maluj*, *Zázda* → *Zazda*, *Pòd Láu* → *Pod Lo*, *Vorìšče* → *Vorišče*.
- Omitting dialect morphological special features: 1. gender (*Préjk Rába* → *Prek Rabe*), *Stára šonžéta* → *Stara senožet*, 2. definite adjectives (*Bàbini djárek* → *Babin jarek*).
- The first non-prepositional component of the name is capitalised (*Pri Brvi*).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The outcome of the research conducted is 350 named geographical features in the Rába Valley. Twenty-three features have doublet names. The results are presented in a dictionary and a map. The dictionary articles for an individual settlement are provided in alphabetical order. A dictionary article consists of an accentuated headword in bold in broad phonetic transcription, followed by information on the name's location on the map, then the separator ▸, followed by the narrow phonetic transcription and standardised spelling of the name in its basic form. If applicable, oblique-case forms are also added to the narrow dialect transcription, usually the accusative and locative singular, and rarely also the genitive singular. This is followed by a documentary section citing the forms of the name as used in various sources, such as the Austro-Hungarian land cadastre (AH cadastre), the volume *Vas megye földrajzi neveikataster* (Geographical Names of Vas County; Balogh *et al*. 1982; shortened to *Vas megye*), the official 1:10,000 maps of the Hungarian Surveying and Mapping Authority from 1998 (topography), contemporary vector data (GURM), and the 1921–1931 military survey data (military survey). A semantic section follows, providing information on the category of the name (microtoponym, hydronym, etc.). The graphic symbol ⓘ (*izpeljava* "derivation") introduces the etymological section, which explains the name's origin based on the following dictionaries: *ESSJ* (Bezlaj *et al*. 2005), *ESSZI* (Snoj 2009), *e-SSKJ* (Ahačič 2023), *SSKP* (Novak 2006), *SSKJ* (Slovar … 2014), and *SZOTAR* (Bajzek Lukač 2019). The graphic symbol Ⓚ (*komentar*, "commentary") introduces any comments by informants shedding additional light on the characteristics of individual names. The cross-reference sign → indicates connections between synonymous names.

Bréjzgje (O9) ▸ nar. *B'rẹ:i̯zg'e*, stand. *Brezje*; AO kataster: *Brezgye*, Vas megye: *Brëjzgyá*, *Brezgye*, *Nyires*, *Brezgye*, vojaška izmera: *Breszgye*, *Bresgye*, topografija: *Nyires*; mtn gozda v Andovcih. ① Izpeljano iz občnega imena, dendronima *breza* 'listnato drevo z belim lubjem (lat. *Betula*)' s pripono *-je*.

Bréjzgje (O9) ▸ dial. *B'rẹ:i̯zg'e*, std. *Brezje*; AH cadaster: *Brezgye*, Vas megye: *Brëjzgyá*, *Brezgye*, *Nyires*, *Brezgye*, military survey: *Breszgye*, *Bresgye*, topography: *Nyires*; microtoponym for a forest in Orfalu (Sln. *Andovci*). ① Derived from the common noun and dendronym *breza* "beech (*Betula* sp.)" with the suffix *-je*.

Figure 5: *Example of a dictionary entry and its English translation*

The cartographic representation of the microtoponyms was created in the form of a large-format map, using a digital orthophoto as a base, onto which the microtoponyms were added (Figure 6).

Figure 6: *Detail of the map showing microtoponyms in the Rába Valley (Source: ZRC SAZU)*

Based on the etymological analysis of the names collected, it can be clearly seen that most microtoponyms are of Slavic or Slovenian origin. Some are also German (e.g., *Bùhbrùn*) and Hungarian (e.g., *Làkatoš dòmb*), and for some the origin could not be established. There are also some mixed-origin examples of two-word names, for which the etymological analysis showed separate development of the two words in the name (e.g., *Gospòčka mazéva*). The shares of names of a particular origin vary across settlements. The share of Slovenian names in the entire area examined is 71%. The origin of 13%

remain unknown due to unclear etymology. A total of 12% of the names are Hungarian, 3% are of mixed origin, and 1% are German. The presence of German can be attributed to the proximity of the Austrian border, as well as the fact that Alsószölnök (Sln. *Dolnji Senik*) is officially a trilingual settlement due to the presence of a German-speaking minority there. The largest share of Slovenian microtoponyms (85%) was identified in Kétvölgy (Sln. *Verica–Ritkarovci*) and the smallest (44%) was identified in Alsószölnök (Sln. *Dolnji Senik*), which also has the largest share of Hungarian names (24%). The smallest shares of Hungarian microtoponyms (5%) were identified in Kétvölgy (Sln. *Verica–Ritkarovci*), Felsőszölnök (Sln. *Gornji Senik*), and Szakonyfalu (Sln. *Sakalovci*). German names appear in Rábatófalu (Sln. *Slovenska ves*) (7%) and Alsószölnök (Sln. *Dolnji Senik*) (3%). The most mixed-origin names (7%) can be found in Rábatófalu (Sln. *Slovenska ves*) and the fewest (0%) in Kétvölgy (Sln. *Verica–Ritkarovci*). The share of names whose origin could not be established is the largest in Alsószölnök (Sln. *Dolnji Senik*) (24%) and the smallest in Rábatófalu (Sln. *Slovenska ves*) (7%). The analysis thus showed that the largest share of Slovenian microtoponyms still known by the locals can be found in Kétvölgy (Sln. *Verica–Ritkarovci*) and the smallest in Alsószölnök (Sln. *Dolnji Senik*). Some official sources that only contain the Hungarian names thus do not reflect the actual use of microtoponyms in the field.

Figure 7: *A trilingual microtoponym on a road sign (Source: Matjaž Geršič)*

The analysis of the motivation for naming the microlocations shows the semantic value of an individual microtoponym. This piece of information is very interesting because, in addition to spatial identification itself, it conveys other characteristics of a named geographical feature. With regard to microtoponyms in the Rába Valley, it was established that they most often express ownership (24%). As a rule, these are two-word names, in which the first word expresses the owner and the second expresses either a geomorphological feature (a slope, gorge, or channel) or equates the named feature with another common noun. Ownership is primarily reflected through oeconyms, or house names (e.g., *Dànistji bréjg*), which in Hungary are common only in areas inhabited by ethnic Slovenians or through a specific professional or other type of owner, such as the Church (e.g., *Pòpofska gáuška*) or a landlord or nobleman (e.g., *Gròfosko*). This is followed by a group of microtoponyms that contain common nouns (15%). They are typical examples of onymisation, or conversion of common nouns into proper nouns (e.g., *njiva* "field" > *Njìfčica*, *potok* "creek" > *Potáučec*, *ribnik* "pond" > *Rìbnjak*). The naming motivation could not be established for 14% of the names, especially due to their unknown origin. Eight percent of the names reveal specific land characteristics, such as windiness (*Séleš fȍldek*), flatness (*Ravèn*), steepness (*Stȑmovec*), or wetness (*Bêrek*). Seven percent of the microlocations are named after plants, especially trees, such as birch (*Bréjzgje*), beech (*Bȕkonja*), and mulberry (*Malìnine*), and only 3% are named after animals—for example, a snail (*Čìga fȍld*), fox (*Lasìcina lȕknja*), or pig (*Svìnski potòk*). Landforms provide the basis for 6% of microtoponyms. They primarily involve terms, such as *jarek* "channel" (*Járak*), *grapa* "gorge" (*Gràbe*), or *breg* "bank" (*Bréjg*). Five percent of microtoponyms contain another geographical name, especially the names of creeks and routes (e.g., *Doléjnjaseníčka páut* "Alsószölnök Route", *Sakaláufski pòtok* "Szakonyfalu Creek", and *Senìški potòk* "Szölnök Creek"). Two interesting examples in this regard are *Slovènski pòtok* "Slovenian Creek", named after Slovenia or Slovenians, and *Bàlaton*, derived from the name of Hungary's largest lake via transonymisation. The naming motivation was very diverse for 4% of the names, and so they were not included in any major group. A similar share of names derives from the names of peoples, especially the Turks (e.g., *Tőrnjak*), the Jews (e.g., *Židáufce*) and the Roma or Gypsies (e.g., *Cigàjnska gràba* "Gypsy Gorge"), and the cardinal points or words referring to other spatial relationships, such as *preko* "across" (*Préjk Rába*), *dolenji* "lower" (*Doléjnji vrčánci*), and *gorenji* "upper" (*Goréjnji pòtok*). Human activity is expressed in 3% of the names; for example, brickmaking (*Ciglénca*), horse riding (*Lájčur*), charging customs (*Cȍln*), and 2% of the names refer to various types of land use, such as orchards (*Áugradgje*), meadows (*Stári háj*), and mountain hayfields (*Šonžéte*), and colour, for example, white (*Béjli máust*), black (*Čȑne mlàke*), and brown (*Ridjàjca*).

The analysis also showed that the same name can occur multiple times in various settlements, where it refers to different geographical features (i.e., it does not refer to a creek that runs through several settlements). Such names are, for example, *Gràba* (in Szakonyfalu (Sln. *Sakalovci*)), *Gràbe* (Apátistvánfalva (Sln. *Števanovci*)), *Gràbe* (Orfalu (Sln. *Andovci*)), and *Gràbica* (Rábatófalu (Sln. *Slovenska ves*)); *Grájka* (Orfalu), *Grájka* (Szakonyfalu (Sln. *Sakalovci*)), *Grájka* (Rábatófalu (Sln. *Slovenska ves*)), and *Grájkje* (Apátistvánfalva (Sln. *Števanovci*)); *Járak* (Apátistvánfalva (Sln. *Števanovci*)), *Járak* (Rábatófalu (Sln. *Slovenska ves*)), *Járek* (Kétvölgy (Sln. *Verica–Ritkarovci*)), *Járek* (Orfalu (Sln. *Andovci*)), and *Járek* (Szakonyfalu (Sln. *Sakalovci*)).

The geographical and linguistic analysis of microtoponyms in the part of the Rába Valley inhabited by ethnic Slovenians clearly showed that Slovenian is used and present in that area. It is true that some names identified in the archival sources have already sunken into oblivion, but most are still alive among the locals. The fact is that the names themselves often no longer reflect the former land use or other characteristics of the feature named because the farming dynamics have changed and much of the land has been overgrown. Nonetheless, the names have remained unchanged. This trend is also evident in some other areas in which similar research has been conducted. Perhaps researchers began to deal with this issue a generation or two too late, but nonetheless most of the names will still be able to be preserved. Given the declining use of Slovenian, it seems that geographical names will be the last remaining beacon of Slovenian identity in this cross-border region, and so it is vital to preserve these names in any way possible.

5. CONCLUSION

The part of Hungary's Rába Valley inhabited by ethnic Slovenians is the smallest cross-border ethnic Slovenian area. Despite a slightly positive trend in the size of the Slovenian ethnic minority evident in the last census, the use of Slovenian in this region is under threat. Therefore, efforts to cultivate the minority's language are all the more important. Slovenian geographical names are a vital part of the language corpus and, via public signs, a primary symbol of the minority's presence in public space. Because some of them, such as the names of settlements, also have an official status, they will most likely remain the last symbol of Slovenian identity in this region. In addition to the names of settlements, there are also other types of Slovenian names present in the area. This article focuses on microtoponyms. It establishes that some of those identified in the primary sources are no longer known or used by the locals, but most are. However, they are greatly endangered because of various processes leading to changes in the countryside, such as agricultural

modernisation, urbanisation, and depopulation, which diminish their role. Hopefully, their identification, linguistic analysis, and cartographic representation presented here will contribute to their preservation both in living use and as an element of intangible cultural heritage of the Rába Valley and the Slovenian language.

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OFFICIAL LANGUAGE, OFFICIAL NAMES? A CASE STUDY OF SASL PLACE NAMES

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ABSTRACT

The pending officialisation of South African Sign Language (SASL) as one of South Africa's twelve official language raises critical questions about its standardisation, application in official domains, and the recognition of SASL place names. Place-name planning, a subset of corpus planning, gains relevance as the Deaf communities uniquely assign signed names to places, often resulting in parallel toponymy that is overlooked in a formal context. This study examines the intersection of language officialisation and the recognition of signed place names and explores the impact of the diverse naming practices employed to create place-name signs. Using a selection of signed names and interviews from an ongoing documentation project, this paper explores the dynamics of language contact, cultural identity, and official recognition in the context of SASL toponymy.

Keywords: Cultural heritage, place-name planning, signed place names, signed toponymy, South African Sign Language (SASL)

1. INTRODUCTION

Sign languages, the rich cultural and linguistic systems of Deaf communities, are often marginalised, functioning as minority and sometimes indigenous languages. Defining minority status involves more than numbers; it's about the unequal resource and power distribution that leads to disadvantage. The Deaf community, with its distinct language and culture, fits this definition. While precise figures are elusive, a significant portion of Deaf individuals exist within hearing-dominated societies, often with limited recognition of their linguistic rights. This disparity underscores the unequal power dynamics, where the focus tends to be on "fixing" deafness rather than valuing sign language. (Healey, Stepnick & Eileen 2018; Turner 2009; Morgans 1999; Reagan 2010, 2020; De Meulder & Murray 2017:137; Krausneker 2003).

The reality that many Deaf children are born to hearing parents contributes to the misunderstanding of the Deaf community's unique position. Despite technological advancements (that prioritise spoken language), signed languages remain crucial for Deaf identity. This persistent marginalisation highlights the need for greater awareness and support of sign languages, recognising them as vital linguistic and cultural heritages. The lack of support, and the focus on trying to "fix" deafness, creates a system of unequal power and resource distribution. However, linguistic legislation frequently neglects sign languages, typically addressing them under the legislation related to disability groups. This neglect reflects a general lack of understanding of sign languages as crucial cultural-identity markers for Deaf communities.

Legislative recognition of sign languages varies significantly, with only a few nations granting them official status. For instance, Kenya has enshrined sign language use in parliament within its constitution, while New Zealand and the Netherlands have recognised their national sign languages through Language Acts. South Africa is distinguished by its constitutional recognition of SASL as an official language in 2023[1], underscoring its cultural and linguistic equivalence with other minority languages in the country. This landmark recognition compels critical considerations in language planning, especially for non-standardised languages like SASL.

According to McLelland (2021), standardised languages achieve their status through linguistic processes of norm development and social acceptance, influenced by ideological factors, focusing on formal contexts, and serving as a reference point for "correctness".

1 The Constitution Eighteenth Amendment Act, 2023 stipulates that the act "... comes into operation on a date fixed by the President by proclamation in the Gazette ..." (see RSA 2023).

Conversely, official languages gain status through legal or political recognition, serving governmental and administrative functions. While a language can be both standardised and official, standardisation emphasises linguistic form and norms, whereas official status concerns a language's socio-political role.

Even though SASL is granted official status, the language itself is not standardised and, as with other sign languages, is known for having localised dialects and variations. This paper therefore explores the dynamics of language officialisation and place-name standardisation through the lens of SASL, highlighting the implications for corpus development and cultural preservation. Specifically, it investigates the factors influencing sign-creation practices for place names, including changes of official place names, the etymology of spoken equivalents, and preferred sign-creating traditions.

2. STANDARDISING SIGNED LANGUAGES: A PLACE-NAME PERSPECTIVE

Language planning initiatives are essential to ensuring its appropriate use in the various domains that corresponds with a language's official status (Schemer 2003). This involves various dimensions, such as status planning (defining social roles of a language), corpus planning (enhancing linguistic forms), acquisition planning (integration into education), and prestige planning (improving social perception) (Kaplan & Baldauf 2003). Small and Cripps (2009) add language-attitude planning, a strategic intervention within language planning that aims to influence and modify people's perceptions and attitudes towards a specific language.

Sign language standardisation, a key aspect of corpus planning, faces unique challenges. Corpus planning often focuses on producing lexicons or dictionaries to record and formalise linguistic features, as seen in the case of Dutch Sign Language (Nederlandse Gebarentaal – NGT) (Schemer 2003). However, Adam (2015) emphasises that while standardisation can promote a language, it may also lead to the exclusion of some or all variations. Historically, standardisation efforts have often prioritised creating resources like dictionaries that present a single sign for each concept, neglecting the natural variation in sign languages.

Furthermore, the lack of a written form and the visual-gestural nature of sign languages complicate standardisation processes that often focus on written language (Johnston 2003). Other factors include the influence of dominant spoken languages, generational gaps in transmission, high variation across signing communities, and limited use

in education. Misconceptions about standardisation, such as the need to eliminate variation, are also prevalent in Deaf communities (WFD 2014).

Despite these challenges, place-name planning offers a valuable avenue for contributing to sign language standardisation. As a form of corpus planning, it involves developing and adding lexical items to the language. Additionally, signed place names, integral to cultural identity, demand a balanced approach between corpus development and the preservation of unique community practices.

While language standardisation focuses on developing a uniform variety, place-name standardisation, facilitated by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN), involves standardising geographical names within a territory. Yet, this group also fosters the protection of minority place names and encourages the documentation of alternative and indigenous toponymies through the promotion of collaborative fieldwork with native language users. This process emphasises the worth of the people and the value of their place names as cultural heritage (UNGEGN 2006).

3. SIGNED PLACE NAMES: LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

Place names are integral to any language and hold cultural and historical significance (Spocter 2018). Signed place names have a similar importance within Deaf communities, serving as identity markers and reflecting unique naming practices. These signs are not merely translations of spoken names but are uniquely created and adopted by Deaf communities, often borrowing from indigenous sign languages to facilitate communication (Revilla 2009). They contribute to identity development and group solidarity (Humphries 2008). Additionally, they constitute a distinct lexical category within sign languages (Paales 2010). As a result, a parallel toponymy is created that exists alongside spoken place names.

Signed place names are developed using various traditions, or methods and strategies to create a sign. These may be practised inconsistently in Deaf communities because of, for example, generational associations and educational differences, adding to the high level of variation in sign languages. The diversity of sign-creation practices enriches the language, where standardisation leads to the selection of only one practice or variant. This poses the risk of potentially eroding linguistic diversity (Adam 2015). Therefore, systematic documentation remains critical for preserving these cultural artifacts while recognising their functional and symbolic significance in Deaf communities.

Du Plessis (2020) agrees that signed place names should be recognised as a unique and dynamic parallel toponymy that coexists with spoken or written names. Including signed place names in a dual system where both spoken and signed variations are officially recognised could contribute to their broader acceptance and use. However, the South African Geographical Names Council still focuses solely on spoken languages in the current standardisation programme (De Lange & Du Plessis 2021).

Despite attempts since the production of the first SASL dictionary, *Talking to the Deaf/ Praat met die Dowes* (Nieder-Heitmann 1980), SASL remains unstandardised, resulting in high variation and localised conventionalisation of signed place names (Loth, Kotzé, & De Lange 2021). Acknowledging that the lack of a written form presents challenges to the recognition of signed place names, De Lange and Du Plessis (2021) argue that UNGEGN's recommendations on minority and unwritten languages can be applied to signed place names. This approach would be crucial for using signed place names in various domains, raising the question of how to achieve official recognition while representing community autonomy.

Continuous documentation of signed place names is an essential step in the codification and standardisation of signed place names. Systematic collection and proper documentation of SASL place names is crucial to keeping track of the developments of the language on a grassroots level and adding to the efforts of appropriate agencies. In this way, planning for SASL place names can contribute to the corpus development of the language itself.

To understand how signed place names are allocated by the Deaf community, it is crucial to grasp how signs are produced and how meaning is conveyed in sign languages. Despite linguistic differences, sign language shares common features due to the use of space, simultaneity, iconicity, and similar sociolinguistic contexts (Johnston *et al*. 2016). Signs are produced using five parameters, namely handshape, palm orientation, location, movement, and non-manual markers. Each parameter is essential, as incorrect usage can change the meaning (Akach & Lubbe 2003). For example, the signs for GREEN, GRASS, and FIRE (Figures 1, 2 and 3) are all produced with both hands in the 5-hand handshape, palms faced towards the signer, in the middle of the signing space. In all three signs, the fingers are moving. Below is the sign for GREEN (without additional movement) (Figure 1):

Figure 1: *GREEN (Source: Author replication)*

However, moving the hands away from the body to the front, changes the meaning to GRASS (Figure 2). Moving the hands up and down in opposite directions changes the sign to FIRE (Figure 3):

Figure 2: *GRASS (Source: Author replication)*

Figure 3: *FIRE (Source: Author replication)*

Non-manual markers, such as facial expressions, convey nuances similar to voice volume and tone in spoken language (Lombaard 2020). In the above example, non-manual markers can be included to indicate how green the trees are, how bushy the grass is, or how severely the fire is burning. Understanding a sign language word or sentence requires consideration of all parameters, as signed languages use blends of gestures and lexical signs (Johnston *et al*. 2016).

Sign languages exhibit variations influenced by sociolinguistic factors like region, age, gender, and family background (Kusters & Lucas 2022; Matthews *et al*. 2009; Morgans 1999). These variations evolve naturally over time and through transmission between generations. Deaf naming practices, including the use of name signs, offer valuable insights into sign languages, cultural traditions, historical events, and language change within the community (Day & Sutton-Spence 2010). Researchers like Lombaard (2020), Paales (2010), and Day & Sutton-Spence (2010) have classified place-name signs predominantly according to five categories, namely phonetic, initialised/arbitrary, descriptive/metonymic/metaphoric, initialised metonymic/metaphoric, and loans/translations.

Phonetic names are based on the sounds of spoken names through mouthing, in other words, imitating the movement of the mouth when referring to a place, which contains making a sound in pronouncing the name (Paales 2010). According to Lombaard, phonetic names are rarely used in SASL due to their association with the oralist period in Deaf education (Lombaard 2020). Before 1994, education was focused on teaching children to read lips and to speak, and they were punished when they used sign language. Initialised/arbitrary signs are the most common in SASL. These signs have no inherent connection to the place and often use a handshape representing a letter from the written name (Day & Sutton-Spence 2010). Examples include South Africa's signed names for the provinces, for example, Northern Cape is signed as n-c and the Eastern Cape is signed as E-C.

Descriptive/metonymic/metaphoric signs refer to physical or notable qualities of a place. This category includes associative signs, which also link the name-giver(s) connection to the place. Initialised metonymic/metaphoric signs combine descriptive and initialised elements, which originally constituted a descriptive sign and changed over time through the addition of a letter from the alphabet. For example, Kimberley was originally signed with a U-handform moving down and inwards to represent the Big Hole. However, this has changed over time, with the U-handform replaced by the first letter of the spoken name (K) (Lombaard 2020). Akach and Lubbe (2003), conducting research on personal name signs, suggest that educational practices contribute to initialisation, since only the

SASL alphabet is taught in school. Loans/translation signs have a direct connection to the written name. This category is favoured for its efficiency and is also common in personal name signs (Lombaard 2020). For example, using the sign for RHINO (Y-handform located on the nose) for the personal name sign for the name "Ryno".

The original intent of this study was to determine whether the South African name changes have resulted in changes in signed place names, since Lombaard (2020) identifies variation not only in signed place names but also in name changes. She argues that changes in place-name signs can reflect evolving traditions and associations within the Deaf community. However, due to the limited dataset, the focus shifted from analysing the impact of official place-name changes to examining the naming practices used to create signed place names.

4. METHODOLOGY

The data collected for this study was a pilot study for developing a larger project to document SASL place names. Ethical clearance was obtained from the General and Human Research Ethical Committee (UFS-HSD2023/1614/4). The data collection took place in Bloemfontein in May 2022. An invitation in SASL was created to explain the purpose and procedure of the study. Random convenience sampling was employed to find participants. The Deaf fieldworker circulated this video amongst her local Deaf acquaintances. Interviews with those that indicated interest were set up. The fieldworker first explained the consent form in SASL and ensured that all facets were understood before the participant signed it. In total, eleven Deaf individuals, all with varying backgrounds in terms of educational attainment, employment, and socio-economic status, participated. The structed interviews were guided by a questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to collect three types of information:

1) Background information, such as age, gender, race, and the language that was spoken in their homes, are factors that influence variation in sign language use.
2) Questions such as "Where did you grow up?", "Where did you go to school?", and "Where do you live?" attempted to elicit the use of place names.
3) To ensure the creation of a comparable, systematic dataset, the final section of the questionnaire included a list of pre-selected place names. These names were selected by the research team as generally well-known places in South Africa – the nine provinces, thirteen main towns, four places where there are schools for the Deaf, and five other prominent places (31 in total). The interviewer fingerspelled the name of the place in question. For example, the interviewer would ask, "do you know a sign for this place", and then fingerspell "Bloemfontein"'.

The interviews were video-recorded, and the videos were downloaded into a secure space. During the first round of processing, the place-name signs were isolated and linguistically annotated in ELAN (linguistic annotation software). Since the dataset is too small for a comparative study between official and sign names, the signs are analysed to identify visible trends in Deaf naming practices. Additionally, signs are compared to the etymology of the correlating spoken name, as recorded in the *Dictionary of Southern African Place Names* (Raper, Möller & Du Plessis 2014). Information from the SAGNC database is included where available.

5. RESULTS

The study documents 197 unique signs out of a possible 341 signs, with some participants lacking knowledge of specific places. The analysis first compares place-name signs to official name changes, then examines the influence of spoken names on signed place names, and finally investigates the observed variation in sign usage. Interestingly, official place-name changes seem to have minimal impact on signed place names. For example, despite the official change from Port Elizabeth to Gqeberha in 2021 (about a year prior to data collection), participants consistently use the pre-existing sign correlated with the old name, P-E. (Figure 4).

Figure 4: *GQEBERHA (Source: Author replication)*

Similarly, the change from Pietersburg to Polokwane (Figure 5) in 2002 shows no clear influence on the sign used, although further research is needed to confirm this.

Figure 5: *POLOKWANE (Source: Author replication)*

One exception is the province Free State, formerly known as Orange Free State. This change was affected in 1995. While most participants use the initialised sign FS (Figure 6a), one participant uses OFS (Figure 6b), referring to the historical name.

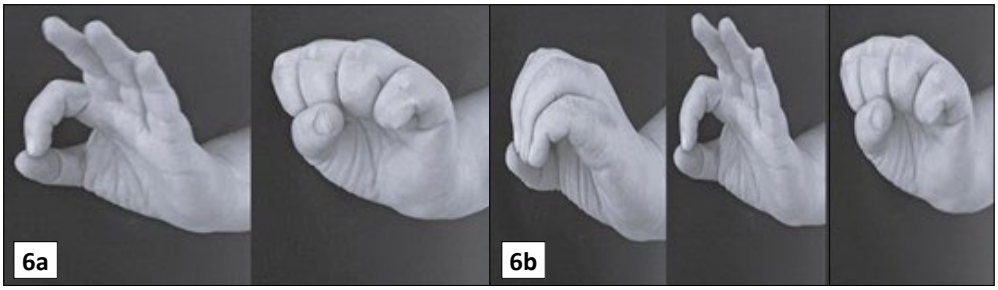

Figure 6a: *FREE STATE (Variation 1) (Source: Author replication)*
Figure 6b: *FREE STATE (Variation 2) (Source: Author replication)*

The etymology of spoken names also appears to have limited influence on signed place names. One clear etymological link is found in the case of "Mpumalanga". The placename sign SUNRISE (Figure 7) clearly correlates with the Zulu meaning of "Mpumalanga", which is "the place where the sun rises" (Raper, Möller, & Du Plessis 2014).

Figure 7: *Mpumalanga (Source: Author replication)*

A possible connection between the meaning of the official name and the sign name is also observed for Bloemfontein, where the sign for ROSE (Figure 8a), potentially refers to the "flower fountain", alluding to the city's association with roses. However, the most used sign for Bloemfontein, OB, (Figure 8b) is derived from historical vehicle number plates, where the letter "O" depicts the province's historical name (Orange Free State), and the letter "B" depicts the place name (Bloemfontein).

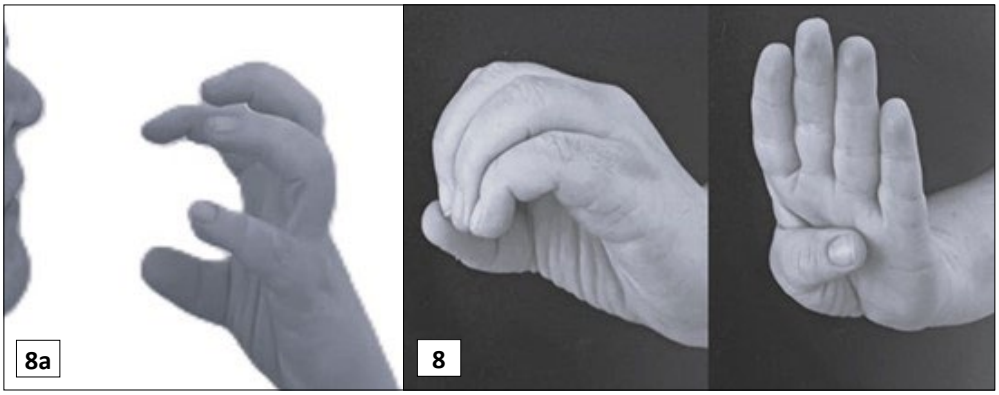

Figure 8a: *BLOEMFONTEIN (Variation 1) (Source: Author replication)*
Figure 8b: *BLOEMFONTEIN (Variation 2) (Source: Author replication)*

5.1 Naming traditions

Figure 9 below shows the naming traditions employed to create the place-name signs in the dataset.

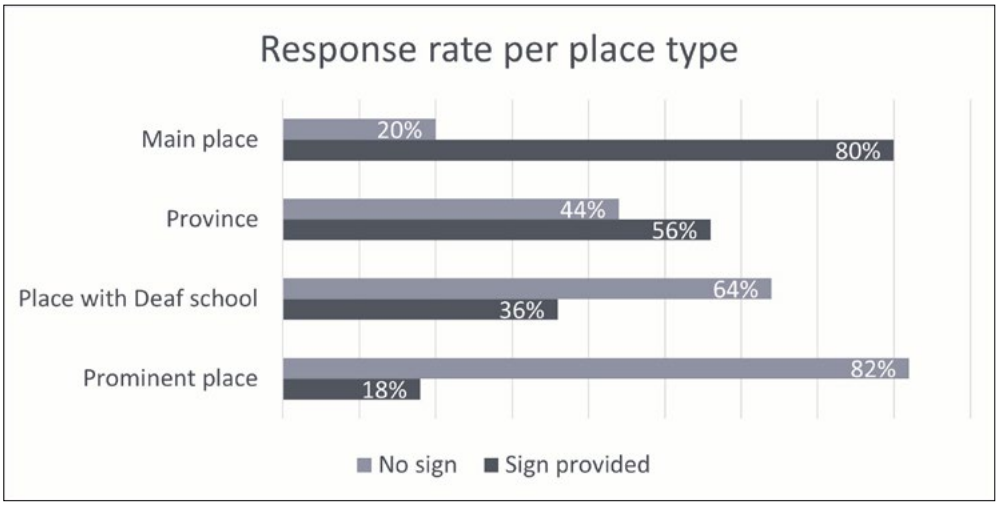

Figure 9: *Prevalence of naming traditions employed in the dataset*

Considering naming traditions, the analysis reveals that just over half of the collected signs are classified as initialised signs, confirming Lombaard's (2020) observation that this category is the most prevalent naming tradition in SASL. Examples include WESTERN CAPE (finger alphabet "W" and "C") (Figure 10), JOHANNESBURG (finger alphabet "J") (Figure 11), and THABA 'NCHU (finger alphabet "T" with additional movement) (Figure 12).

Figure 10: *WESTERN CAPE (Source: Author replication)*

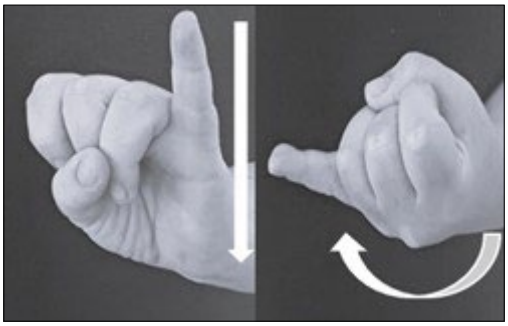

Figure 11: *JOHANNESBURG (Source: Author replication)*

Figure 12: *THABA 'NCHU (Repeat movement twice) (Source: Author replication)*

Approximately 20% of the signs combine initials with a descriptive element. For example, Kimberley's name sign is initialised with "K" where the movement downwards refer to the town's famous open-pit diamond mine (Figure 13).

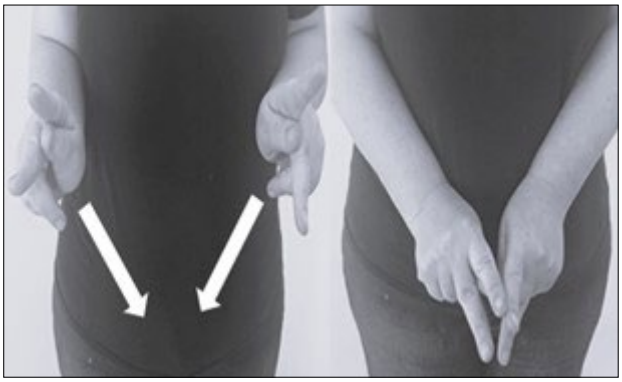

Figure 13: *KIMBERLEY (Source: Author replication)*

Around 10% of responses are arbitrary, such as TALKING/HEARING for Pietermaritzburg (Figure 14).

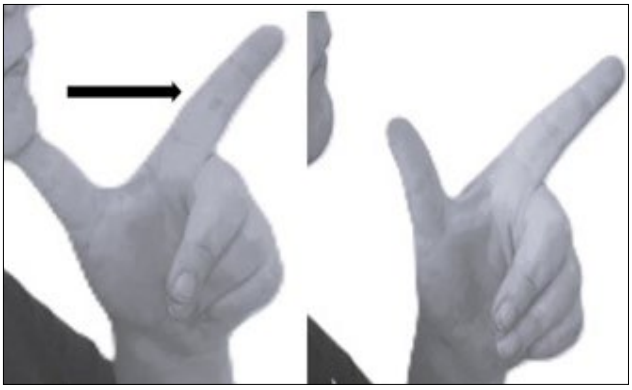

Figure 14: *PIETERMARITZBURG (Repeat movement twice) (Source: Author replication)*

Another 10% are descriptive, like NKANDLA (Figure 15), meaning "Zuma's home", the town where South Africa's former president Zuma stays. Polokwane's name sign is the same as rural (Image 5), only with bigger movements. Although Polokwane is an urban area and the capital of the Limpopo province, most of the surrounding area is rural in nature.

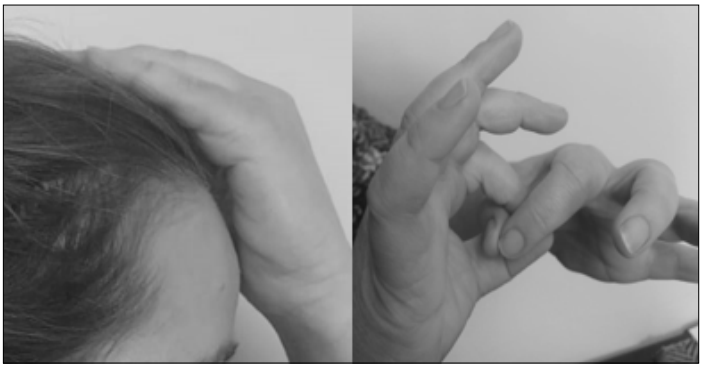

Figure 15: *NKANDLA (Source: Author replication)*

Loaning or translating accounts for 5% of the signs, as seen in the examples of BLOEMFONTEIN (Figure 8a) and MPUMALANGA (Figure 7). A small number of signs (3%) combine initialisation and loaning, such as EAST LONDON (Figure 16), where the "e" is fingerspelled, but the L refers to London in England. The research team could not translate the meaning of the sign and is therefore indicated as unsure in the table above. Additionally, no phonetic signs were identified in this study, which also confirms Lombaard's (2020) findings.

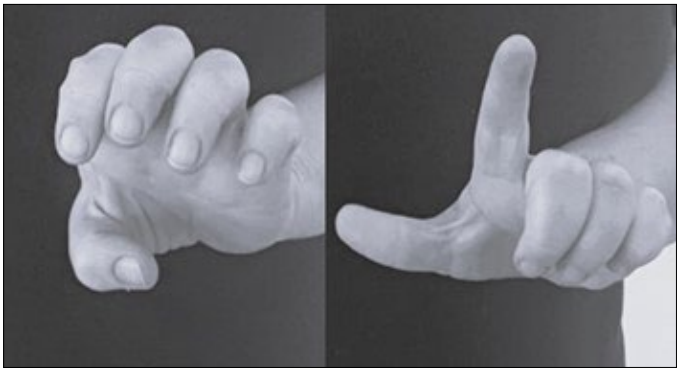

Figure 16: *EAST LONDON (Source: Author replication)*

Interestingly, while most place names are elicited through a singular naming tradition, BLOEMFONTEIN (Figure 8a and 8b), PRETORIA (Figure 17a and 17b), and CAPE TOWN (Figure 18a, 18b, and 18c) show greater variation in both the signs and the naming traditions employed. This suggests that prominent or frequently used place names may be more susceptible to variation within the Deaf community.

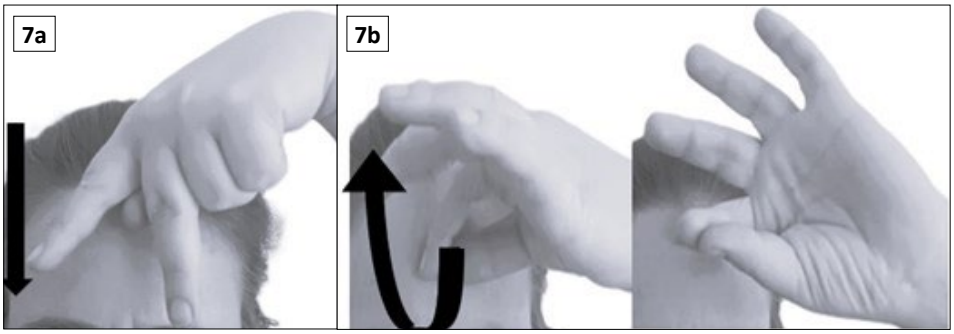

Figure 17a: *PRETORIA Variation 1 (Repeat) (Source: Author replication)*
Figure 17b: *PRETORIA Variation 2 (Source: Author replication)*

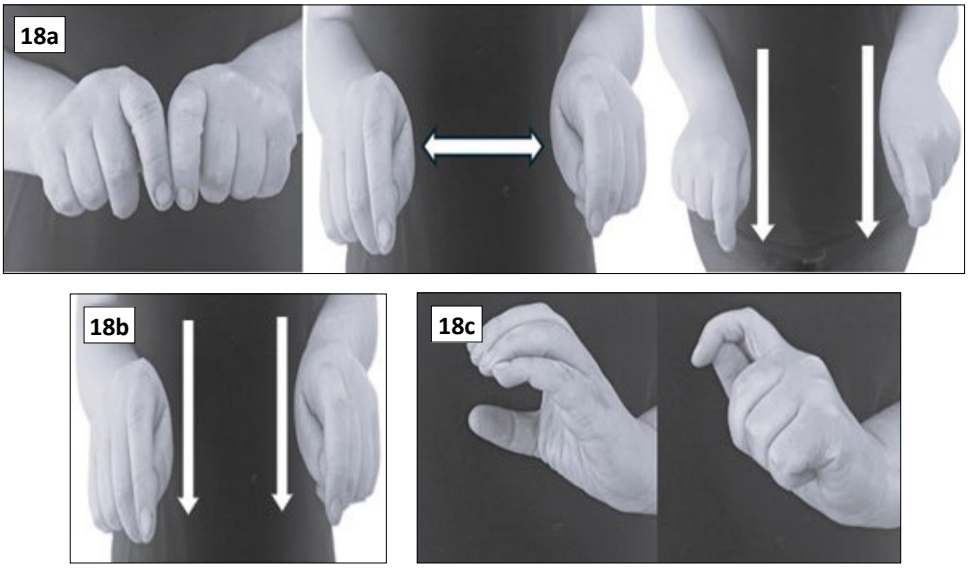

Figure 18a: *CAPE TOWN Variation 1 (Source: Author replication)*
Figure 18b: *CAPE TOWN Variation 2 (Repeat movement twice) (Source: Author replication)*
Figure 18c: *CAPE TOWN Variation 3 (Source: Author replication)*

5.2 Types of places

The pre-selected place names listed in the questionnaire are grouped according to the type of name, namely Main place, Province, Place with Deaf school [schools for the Deaf], and Prominent place. Figure 19 below reflects the response rate for each of these categories.

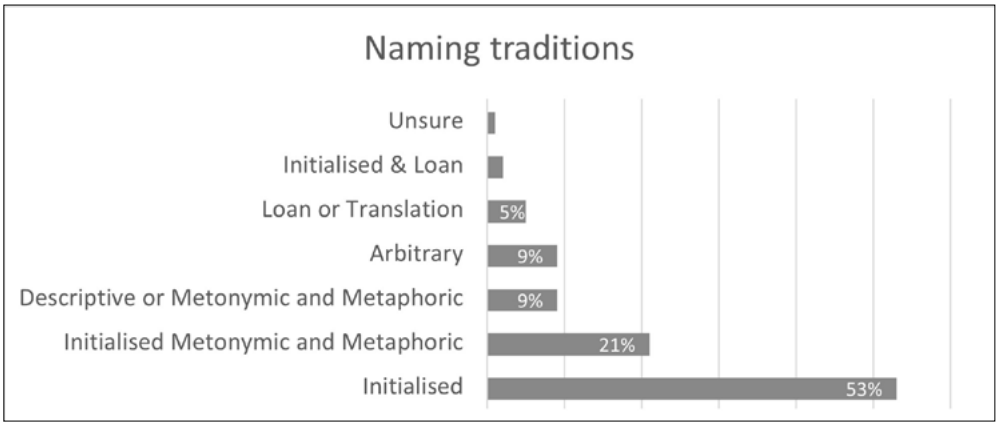

Figure 19: *Response rate per type of place*

Analysing responses per place type reveals that "main places" (major towns) has the highest response rate (80%), with "Bloemfontein" eliciting a sign from every participant. Interestingly, Bloemfontein is also the only place for which some participants provided multiple signs, suggesting potential variation in well-known locations. Provinces has a moderate response rate, with over half of the participants only signing PROVINCES instead of naming the different nine provinces. However, the categories "Places with Deaf schools" and "Prominent places" yield significantly fewer responses, with 64% and 82% of participants, respectively, not knowing signs for these locations. This discrepancy highlights a potential divergence between what is considered a "well-known" place by the general hearing population compared with specific Deaf communities.

6. DISCUSSION

Deaf communities allocate place name signs based on relevance and lived experience. This explains the low response rate for certain places in the study, as unfamiliarity likely played a role. Furthermore, challenges with literacy emerged during data collection, as some participants struggled with fingerspelling and written presentations of place names. This highlights the importance of considering educational disparities within Deaf communities when conducting research and standardising place names. Interestingly, the study revealed that the recent official name change from Port Elizabeth to Gqeberha had no impact on the local signed toponymy. This further emphasises the autonomy of signed place names and their grounding in the Deaf community experiences.

While the data indicates a preference for initialisation in SASL place naming, other traditions also hold value, for example descriptive name signs. This consistency across respondents suggests a degree of conventionalisation or collective agreement within the community. These findings underscore the need for localised, participatory research to inform standardisation efforts. Signed place names are deeply rooted in the lived experiences of Deaf communities, and standardisation processes must acknowledge this reality. While initialisations are prevalent, other naming traditions hold collective value, necessitating inclusive approaches that recognise and accommodate this diversity. The lack of influence from spoken name changes further reinforces the autonomy of signed toponymy, emphasising the need for dual recognition systems that acknowledge this parallel naming system.

7. CONCLUSIONS

This study illustrates the complexities of standardising SASL place names, where linguistic variation, cultural practices, and administrative needs intersect. To ensure inclusive standardisation, future efforts must prioritise community participation, respect regional traditions, and develop innovative approaches for unwritten languages. Further research should expand documentation across diverse Deaf communities, proving a comprehensive foundation for informed decision-making. Only through such an inclusive approach can SASL's rich linguistic heritage be effectively preserved and integrated in official frameworks. This research highlights the linguistic, cultural, and practical implication of SASL's officialisation of place-name recognition. By exploring the interplay of language planning, cultural identity, and administrative recognition, this study situates SASL place names within broader global discussions on minority language preservation.

From a names-planning perspective, this pilot study reveals several challenges. The tendency of Deaf communities to know only signed names for relevant places necessitates localised research and careful consideration of distribution methods, especially given the impact of educational disparities in literacy and access. Furthermore, the South African Geographical Names Council (SAGNC) must recognise that the signed place names are not merely translations of spoken names and that variations may exist even for places with the same spoken name. The data also indicates that changes in spoken names do not have an immediate impact on signed place names, suggesting a degree of autonomy within Deaf naming practices.

The variation in naming traditions observed in this study underscores the need for flexible standardisation approaches that accommodate this diversity. Given the lack of a standardised form of SASL and the community's resistance to it, the SAGNC must develop clear guidelines for recognising multiple or alternative names. This could involve closer collaboration with the Deaf community in selecting preferred name signs, considering local preferences and naming traditions. Furthermore, innovative methods are needed to address the standardisation of SASL place names due to the absence of a written system.

This pilot study, while limited in scope, provides valuable insights into the complexities of standardising SASL place names. More extensive research is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of signed place names and naming traditions in South Africa before official recognition processes are initiated.

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All images of signs in this paper are replicated by a hearing dominant left-hand signer.

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