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Movements and Changes in the Forename Stock in Sweden Between the 1990s and the 2010s

Abstract

This paper examines the many recent fluctuations in the forename stock in Sweden, both concerning the contents of the stock, and the popularity changes over the last decades. Many more names are now in use, and even more names have changed in frequency. This is partly a natural phenomenon, but it also reflects changes in the population structure. Which names are popular today? Where do the new names originate from? How many new names have reached a certain number of bearers? When new immigrant groups replace older ones, how is that reflected in the name stock? Are more pet forms of first names used as official names nowadays? How are the latter, more liberal judicial interpretations of the Personal Names Act valid 1983–2017 reflected in name usage? These questions are discussed in this paper. Comparisons are made between the stock of spoken names of all Swedish residents in the late 1990s and the current popular names of both babies and all Swedish residents.

Keywords

anthroponomasticon, forenames, name changes, name giving, Sweden

1. Introduction

In the field of socioonomastic research, an important component is the study of how the name corpus and name usage in a society varies according to different factors in society, such as social and cultural changes (Akselberg, 2010, p. 16). This paper has evolved from my work on a contemporary dictionary of forenames used in Sweden (Leibring, 2017a, pp. 69–79). I am revising and extending the first edition of “Förnamn i Sverige” [Forenames in Sweden], (FS1) written by the well-known, now deceased, onomastic scholar Eva Brylla and published in 2004. This is the only forename dictionary in Sweden based on current onomastic research. In that volume, she includes all forenames having at least 400 bearers in Sweden in 1995. My ambition for the new edition is to follow that template. To achieve that, I had to investigate recent additions to the name stock in Sweden. This was done by getting access to the full name statistics from 2015 and 2018, and comparing them to the stock in FS1. I was surprised by the popularity fluctuations among the names during this relatively short time, but even more so by the multitude of names not found in the FS1, many of which now had several hundred bearers. This phenomenon is of course partly due to the large immigration Sweden has experienced during the last decades, but among the new names were also many not emanating from any of the big immigrant languages. This situation has inspired me to examine from where these new names originate, and how the names of the new immigrant groups are reflected in the current name landscape. A study of how the top popularity lists for the entire population and for new babies only have changed over the last decades could give some answers, as would comparing those lists with the stock of new names. It would also be interesting to look into whether the more liberal interpretations of the Personal Names Act may in any way have influenced the changes in the name stock. The issue of which names to include in the new edition of the dictionary will come as a natural follow-up later in the paper.

2. Aims and methodology

My aim for this paper is to give some preliminary answers to the issues touched upon in the introduction. I have formulated five questions for examination in this paper: 1) How have the top names for population and babies changed over the last decades? 2) How many names not found in FS1 have now reached a certain number of bearers? 3) Where do these new names originate from? 4) Are new immigrant groups reflected in the name stock? 5) Can we see any indications that the court decisions on the Personal Names Act have influenced the name stock?

As a starting point for answering these questions I will a) present and discuss the current Swedish top-names for both the population and for newborns and compare them to the figures from the late 1990s, b) identify “new names”, i.e. those not included in FS1 but now having reached a certain number of bearers, and c) show some statistics on where the “new names” have their roots and analyse them. I will limit myself to spoken names (see next section) because these are the forenames visible outside the identification cards and the closest family. My method is quantitative and is based on the material from official statistics. There will, however, be some more qualitative reasoning concerning which parameters can be used to categorize names in different groups. I will also make some comparisons based on gender differences.

An important question is also how to draw the limits for the stock in the new dictionary edition (FS2). I decided to include all names that, on a certain date (December 31, 2018), had at least 400 bearers as a spoken name. This amounts to the narrowing down of the name stock from the first edition, but I can argue that because it is only the spoken names that are used in daily life, they are the ones that have the chance to become more well-known (Frändén, 2013, pp. 64–65), and that the larger population and bigger name stock justifies this sharpening of the criteria used.

3. The Swedish naming system and some terms that are used

Because the English terms for different types of names denoting an individual person are somewhat indefinite, a few words by way of explanation are necessary. *Given names*, *first names*, and *forenames* are three terms used indiscriminately in the onomastic literature, whereas in older literature one can also find *baptismal name* and *Christian name* (for a discussion of these terms see Leibring, 2016, pp. 199f). Taking my full name, *Ingrid Anna Katharina Leibring*, as an example, I may say I have three given names or forenames. Of these, my third name, *Katharina*, is my *call name* or my *spoken name*, i.e. the name that I use in everyday life. My surname or family name is *Leibring*. I do not have any *middle name* (Sw. *mellannamn*) in the Anglo-American sense, because the Swedish ‘mellannamn’ was a non-inheritable surname placed between the forenames and the surname and was introduced in the Personal Names Act of 1983. Its use was discontinued in the new act from 2017 (see more on this in Leibring, 2017b).

In this paper, the terms *forename* for all given names (i.e. not surnames) of a person, *spoken name* (for the one or two name(s) that are used in daily life), and *surname* (Sw. *efternamn*) will be used. I will also use the terms *female name* for forenames used mostly by women/girls and *male name* for forenames used mostly by men/boys. This does not imply that the names are gender-specific; in Sweden, no forenames since 2009 can be forbidden because of the bearer’s gender not being compliant with the customary use of the name. If a name is used more than occasionally by both women and men, this name is marked as a *gender-neutral name*.

Some of the points of the Swedish system of personal naming system that are relevant for this paper are as follows:

- All forenames given to children or applied for by adults in Sweden have to comply with the Personal Names Act (the latest version was approved in 2017), on which the National Tax Agency is the deciding body. Regarding forenames, the Act states that they can be rejected if they are seen as offensive, could lead to discomfort or trouble for the bearer, are used as surnames or are in any other way deemed as unsuitable (see more on this in Leibring, 2017b). However, forenames borne by immigrants need not be examined or approved.

- There is no upper limit on the number of forenames a person can have. Names can also be added, removed or changed several times. About 60% of the Swedish population have two forenames, about 28% have three and about 10% have one forename (Göransson, 2009). It is very rare for people to have more than five forenames.
- A person's spoken name does not need to be the first of their forenames. Euphony in the name-string is regarded as important, and this has often meant that longer names are placed in a later position, as in my case (see above), even though the longer name is the spoken name.
- Many forenames transferred from older generations in the family are used, but not as spoken names. A consequence of this custom is that the top lists of the most popular spoken names and of all the most popular forenames do not correspond completely (Frändén, 2013, p. 92).

4. Statistical material and figures for forenames in Sweden

Since 1999, Statistics Sweden has published lists of the most popular forenames and the most popular spoken names annually. There are also annual lists published of the most popular spoken names given to babies each year.¹ I have also had access to a complete set of spoken names in Sweden as of December 31, 2015,² as well as to the quantitative data for individual names for later years. The population of Sweden was around 10 million in 2015. A total of over 400,000 different forms of forenames was used, if all spellings are counted separately. Of these, around 200,000 name forms were used by only one bearer. If this sum of all forenames is narrowed down to spoken names only, we obtain a total of about 135,000 name forms used by women, and about 113,000 name forms used by men. The number of names

¹ All datasets on name statistics used in the present work are available on the Statistics Sweden (Statistiska centralbyrån, SCB) website: <https://www.scb.se/be0001-en>

² *Folkbokförda 31 december 2015 efter tilltalsnamn*, database at the Institute for Language and Folklore (Isolf), Uppsala.

having more than 10 bearers in 2015 was just under 12,000 name forms by women, and about 10,500 name forms by men.

Sweden's population has since increased to about 10.5 million, and, since 2015, due to the recent large immigration waves, there are now more men than women living in Sweden. Whether, and how, this reflects on the names that have recently become popular will be discussed later. The latest figures available (from 2020) show that around 15,000 names used by women had 10 or more bearers, and about 13,000 names used by men had 10 or more bearers. The name stock in Sweden (defined as name forms having 10 or more bearers) has thus expanded by over 20% for both genders over the last five years.

5. The most popular names in Sweden today compared to the late 1990s

If we compare the most popular spoken names in Sweden in 1999 to those of today (Table 1 and 2), we find some changes. The reason I use 1999 as my starting point, and not 1995 as in the FS1, is because 1999 is the earliest year for which Statistics Sweden has published separate figures for spoken names, in contrast to all forenames. It should be noted that different spellings have been lemmatized under the most common form by Statistics Sweden (for a more longitudinal study of the linguistic structure of popular forenames in Sweden, see Gustafsson 2020).

As could be expected, the changes are not huge, but three names for women (*Sara*, *Emma* and *Marie*) have entered the top 10 list, while *Ingrid*, *Ulla*, and *Inger* have left it. This is explained by the fact that the former three names have been popular as baby names for the last several decades, while of the latter three, only *Ingrid* has remained commonly used for the naming of girls since the 1970s. Among the male names, two names (*Sven* and *Hans*) have left and been replaced by *Peter* and *Thomas*.

Among the top 100 spoken names, the turnover is equal for both male and female names, and 21 names have been replaced. The new male names on the top list are: *Albin*, *Ali*, *Arvid*, *Edvin*, *Elias*, *Felix*, *Gabriel*, *Hugo*, *Isak*, *Josef*, *Kevin*, *Leo*, *Liam*, *Lucas*, *Ludvig*, *Max*, *Mohamed*, *Oliver*, *Olle*, *Samuel*, and *William*.

Table 1. Most popular spoken names for women in Sweden in 1999 and 2020

Rank	1999	2020
1	Anna	Anna
2	Eva	Eva
3	Karin	Maria
4	Maria	Karin
5	Ingrid	Sara
6	Kerstin	Kristina
7	Lena	Lena
8	Kristina	Emma
9	Ulla	Kerstin
10	Inger	Marie

Source: own work based on Statistics Sweden.

Table 2. Most popular spoken names for men in Sweden in 1999 and 2020

Rank	1999	2020
1	Karl	Lars
2	Lars	Mikael
3	Per	Anders
4	Anders	Johan
5	Erik	Erik
6	Johan	Per
7	Jan	Peter
8	Sven	Karl
9	Mikael	Thomas
10	Hans	Jan

Source: own work based on Statistics Sweden.

The new female names are: *Agnes, Alexandra, Alice, Alva, Ebba, Ella, Emilia, Felicia, Isabelle, Karolina, Klara, Linn, Lovisa, Maja, Mikaela, Moa, Nathalie, Nina, Olivia, Viktoria, and Wilma.*

Most of these names have been popular as baby names since the late 20th century. A few of them, e.g., *Arvid, Edvin, Alice, and Klara*, are also what could be called great-grandparent names, as they enjoyed great popularity in the early 1900s. Names with a short history in Sweden are the

Arabic *Ali* and *Mohamed* and the English *Kevin* and *Liam*. The former pet forms *Olle* and *Maja* (from *Olof* and *Maria*) are now frequent as official forms while the use of the names *Moa* and *Linn* had originally been inspired by cultural personalities (namely, the authors Moa Martinson and Linn Ullmann, who was primarily known as the daughter of Ingmar Bergman and Liv Ullmann).

6. The most popular baby names in Sweden today compared to the late 1990s

If we now turn to the names given to babies (see Table 3 and 4), we would expect a bigger turnover, because fashion in baby names changes more rapidly than for the full population. This is confirmed by the fact that only one top girl name of 1999, *Wilma*, was still found among the top ten names in 2020. Two boy names, *Oscar* and *William*, have stayed equally popular for the last decades. The trend for short spoken names, preferably composed of two syllables, is visible on both top ten lists. On the top 100 lists, 59 girl names and 54 boy names have been replaced. The well-known finding that the fashion in girl names changes faster than for boy names seems to be still valid.

Table 3. Most popular names given to baby girls in 1999 and 2020

Rank	1999	2020
1	Emma	Alice
2	Julia	Maja
3	Elin	Elsa
4	Hanna	Astrid
5	Amanda	Wilma
6	Linnea	Freja
7	Wilma	Olivia
8	Matilda	Selma
9	Moa	Alma
10	Ida	Ella

Source: own work based on Statistics Sweden.

Table 4. Most popular names given to baby boys in 1999 and 2020

Rank	1999	2020
1	Oscar	Noah
2	Filip	William
3	Simon	Hugo
4	Erik	Lucas
5	Anton	Liam
6	Viktor	Oscar
7	Alexander	Oliver
8	William	Matteo
9	Jonathan	Elias
10	Emil	Adam

Source: own work based on Statistics Sweden.

A comparison between baby names and the names of the full population shows a decline in the correspondence over the last two decades. In 1999, as many as 37 female names were found on both lists, while in 2020 there were only 29 such names. Among the male names, 47 names were found on both lists in 1999, and this figure was reduced to 38 in 2020. The increased lack of correspondence between babies' names and those of the population in general could be interpreted as a result of the wish in recent decades by young

parents in many countries to create unique names and to try out hitherto unfamiliar names (see more on this e.g., in Lieberson, 2000, *passim*; Hanks et al., 2006, pp. vii–x; Ainiyala et al., 2012, pp. 180–185; Aldrin, 2015; Nübling et al., 2015, pp. 119–120). This is also emphasized by the fact that the most popular names are given to fewer children now than around the turn of the millennium. Even though the number of babies born was higher in 2020 than two decades earlier, in 2000 the most popular girl name, *Julia*, was given to 2,000 girls, while only about 800 got the most popular name, *Alice*, in 2020. In 2000, 78% of the girls and 82% of the boys were given any of the 100 most popular names for each sex. In 2020, this percentage had reduced to 54% of the girls and 57% of the boys.

7. New names in Sweden

After having examined the top names for the full population and for babies, we can see that the most popular names are still quite stable, even when the faster turnover of babies' names is considered. However, the plethora of new names in Sweden is making an impact, and an investigation of which of these names have reached the highest popularity and what their background is, will provide an interesting and useful insight into the slowly changing name landscape. As mentioned earlier, my work on the new edition of FS2 has given me the opportunity to dig deeper into this hitherto poorly investigated area.

All in all, 421 new names (i.e. those not included in the 2004 dictionary by Eva Brylla (FS1), but with at least 400 bearers in 2018) were identified. Because the first edition of the dictionary contains around 1,300 names, this will mean an increase of around 30%. Of these new names, 220 are primarily borne by men, 200 by women, and one name (*Tintin*) is used as a gender-neutral name. The most common names are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Most common “new” names (ordered by popularity)

Female names	Male names
Maryam (Meryam)	Melvin
Nova	Elliott
Meja	Alvin
Amina	Wilmer
Nour	Mustafa
Zainab	Yusuf
Livia	Noel
Leia	Wille
Bianca	Hussein
Emina	Neo
Tatiana	Khaled
Vilda	Loke
Joline	Milo
Eila	Julian
Aisha	Elton
Aida	Adnan
Juni	Mahdi
Malva	Ismael
Katarzyna	Mehmet
Milla	Pawel

Source: own work based on Statistics Sweden.

Around 80 of these popular names had over 1,000 bearers in 2018, with *Maryam (Meryam)* and *Melvin* borne by over 7,000 individuals each. Many of the most popular new names come from different linguistic and cultural areas. Names of Arabic, English and Slavonic origin as well as new Swedish creations and pet forms are all found in the name stock. How to categorize and analyse these names to gain insight into this group is an intricate issue. Inspired by the works of the Norwegian scholar Gulbrand Alhaug (2004, pp. 161–176), I have decided to divide these names into groups primarily according to their etymology but modified by cultural aspects. One example of the latter are some names of diverse origin that have reached Sweden through Anglo-American popular culture, e.g., *Jamie*, *Loui*, and *Timothy*. These names will be classed as English, even though etymologically they

are English modifications, and may even be pet forms of names of Hebrew, French or Greek-Latin origin.

The determination of groups was made to fit the name stock and not from any prefabricated template. Eight groups were considered as significant: English (meaning culturally English or Anglo-American), Germanic (excluding English), Middle Eastern, Romance, Scandinavian, Slavonic, Mixed, and Others. Of these, the category Middle Eastern includes names of primarily Arabic, but also Kurdish, Persian, or Turkish origin. The group Mixed includes names that are found in different language areas, and where it has not been possible to determine which is the main root, or where the origin is uncertain. The small group Others contains names from Aramaic, Finnish, Hungarian, and Somali.

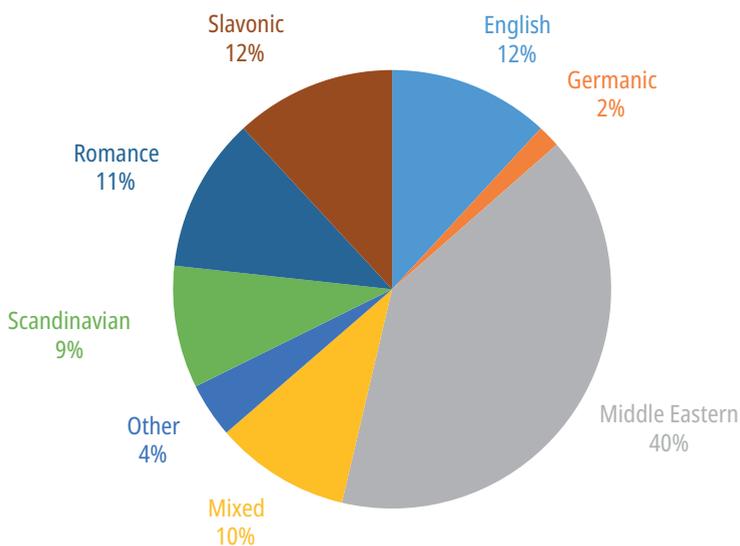


Figure 1. All new names divided by group of origin

Source: own work based on Statistics Sweden.

The pie chart (Figure 1) based on all 421 new names clearly shows that a large part of the new names in Sweden stem from the Middle East, the area of origin of many immigrants in the last 40 years, and especially the last decade. Names of Arabic origin are dominant in this group. In the first edition of

the dictionary, only around 10 names were of Arabic origin, so the increase is certainly noticeable. Immigration of a somewhat earlier date also plays a role in the increase in the number of Slavonic names and at least some of the Romance names, mainly because of the many immigrants from Eastern Europe in the 1980s and 1990s and from Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s. The new English names have, in contrast, become popular in Sweden more as a result of globalization and the influence of popular culture, much of which is dominated by North American artists and media productions.

Not all new names are imported. Among the group of Scandinavian names there are several earlier common pet forms of names, e.g., *Titti* (< *Kristina*) and *Wille* (< *Vilhelm* or *William*). There are also names borrowed from concrete Swedish appellatives, such as *Malva* and *Vide* (both plant names), and newly created names, e.g., *Meja* and *Vilda*. Further, the group includes four names made popular in Sweden by the works of the well-known author Astrid Lindgren: *Lovis*, *Madicken*, *Mattis* and *Mio*.

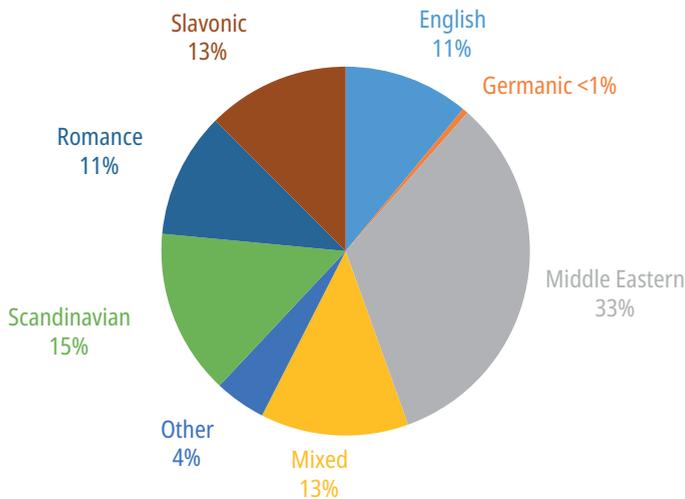


Figure 2. New female names by origin

Source: own work based on Statistics Sweden.

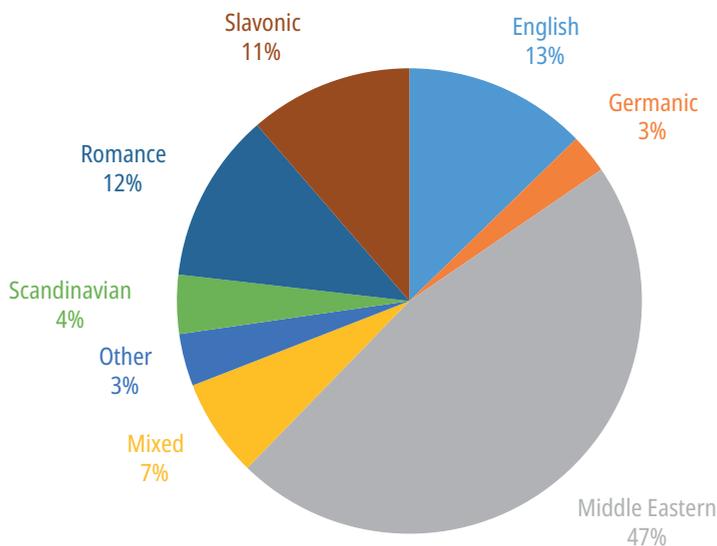


Figure 3. New male names by origin

Source: own work based on Statistics Sweden.

If the two genders are analysed separately, the pie charts (Figures 2 and 3) show some differences. Among the female names, the share of those from the Middle East is down to 33%, while Scandinavian names take the second position with 15%. As stated earlier, one part of this slice consists of pet forms of female names that recently have gained acceptance as official names, partly because of the more liberal interpretations of the Personal Names Act. It is nowadays quite easy to add a forename as an adult. This trend of making your pet name your official spoken name illustrates the more informal society in today’s Sweden paired with an international urge to create your own brand – to be unique.

The most striking point in the pie chart for male names, is the large section of names originating in the Middle East compared to the smaller slice among the female names. This naturally reflects the fact that the majority of the recent immigrants have been male, with many coming from Syria and other countries in the Middle East region. In Sweden, about 50,000 more men than women are now registered as inhabitants, an uncommon situation in

Europe because the populations in most countries in this region consist of more women than men. Statistics from Eurostat show that Sweden and Malta are the only EU countries where men outnumber women, this together with the two Nordic countries – Norway and Iceland (Eurostat, 2022).

The proportion of new male names of Scandinavian origin is significantly smaller than among the new female names. One explanation for this could be that many culturally Swedish pet forms for very common names of different origins, e.g., *Kalle* < *Karl*, *Olle* < *Olof*, *Pelle* < *Per*, have been common as official names for at least a century. Also, name creators seem to have been keener on inventing new names for girls, something consistent with the well-established fact that girl names' popularity during the last century has been more volatile and changed faster.

A short survey on which names and name types have diminished in popularity during the last 20–25 years shows that, as could be expected, names popular among people born in the 1920s and 1930s have diminished as the name-bearers have passed away. This includes double names, e.g., *Maj-Britt* and *Jan-Erik*, as well as longer Scandinavian names containing *Gun-* and *Ing-*. Some of these names have recently made a come-back as “granny names”. Another trend is for names of Finnish origin to decrease in popularity as spoken names. (Finnish is one of the official minority languages in Sweden and there was a large labour immigration from Finland during the 1950s and 1960s.) It would appear that younger generations of Finnish descent in Sweden are less eager to give their children Finnish spoken names (Frändén, 2014).

8. The new names as baby names

As shown, the top lists of popular baby names changed faster than the top lists of names for the general population. There is some correspondence between the popular new names in general and the popular baby names, but not in full. This is of course only to be expected, because many new names have arrived in Sweden with adult immigrants. It should be pointed out, once again, that a certain amount of the new names' popularity is due neither to immigration nor to baby name fashion, but to name changes or additions made by adults.

However, several of the more popular new names are also found on the top lists for baby names. Among the popular new names shown in Table 5, eight of the female names (*Maryam, Nova, Meja, Livia, Leia, Bianca, Joline, and Juni*) and ten of the male names (*Melvin, Elliott, Alvin, Wilmer, Noel, Wille, Loke, Milo, Julian, and Elton*) are found among the 100 most popular baby names in 2020. As we can see, many of these names are male names borrowed from English, e.g., *Melvin, Elliott, Alvin, Julian, and Elton*. This name type, where the names are often former family names (Hanks et al., 2006, s.v.), has been very popular for baby boy names during the last two decades, not just in Sweden but in several countries in Western Europe. *Maryam* is the only new name of Middle Eastern origin among the top 100 baby names. It should be added that the Arabic names *Ali, Amir, Muhammad, and Omar*, all on the top 100 baby boy names list, all have a longer history in Sweden and were already included in FS1. Among the new popular names for baby girls, we find names from international popular culture (*Nova, Leia, and Joline*) as well as Swedish names: *Juni* (which is identical to the month name ‘June’) and *Meja*. Two boy names, *Wille* and *Loke*, can also be regarded as domestic. *Loke* is the name of a trickster character from Scandinavian mythology and has been quite popular in the last decades.

9. The Personal Names Acts: Influences on the name stock

In the 1990s, several court rulings of the then valid Personal Names Act (from 1983) resulted in the liberalization of what forename types could be approved. More pet forms and even individual by-names were then approved as official names. A negative consequence of this was that the decisions from the different offices at the deciding institute, the National Tax Agency (Skatteverket), became very unstable and did not follow any distinct rulings, something pointed out by onomastic scholars (Andersson, 2013; Brylla, 2016).

One of the aims of the new Personal Names Act of 2017 was to make sure that the decisions on forename approval become more uniform and to prevent too unfamiliar creations from becoming official names. The liberalization has, however, continued, as the courts have not shown much interest in taking linguistic or onomastic advice in their decisions (Entzenberg & Torensjö, 2020).

For the purpose of this paper, the consequences of the more liberal rulings consist mostly of the approval of popular pet forms as official names. Some of these forms, e.g., *Bibbi*, *Fia*, *Mille*, and *Titti* have reached 400 bearers and will thus be included in the dictionary. Regarding the many individual by-names, they are, with a few exceptions, unlikely to reach that level of official spoken names.

10. Conclusions

It is clear that the character and content of the onomastic landscape in Sweden is undergoing changes, but the top is still stable, as is to be expected. A few names from more recent immigrant groups have already entered the male names popularity lists, while names from older immigrant groups are found further down the top lists. More pet forms of names are used as official names nowadays, partly due to the more liberal interpretations of the Personal Names Act. The international yearning for uniqueness in naming is visible, and the acceptance for names from different areas of the lexicon has grown. The onomastica of baby names shift more quickly than the population in total, which is natural, because the name-givers of babies are only active for about 20 years. There is still a tendency that the popularity of girl names is regarded as more unstable than the more stable popularity of boy names, but changes in popular boy names occur faster. To conclude, the landscape is now more densely populated by names of many different origins, and it will be very interesting to observe if and how some more foreign name patterns will blend into the overall name stock and from what areas future name-givers will derive inspiration. The new dictionary will include many new names from different languages and cultures and will thus give a fuller picture of the onomastic landscape in Sweden.

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