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The Reasons Behind Changing Foreign-Sounding Surnames in Sweden and Their Development Between 1925 and 2015

Abstract

In this paper I investigate surname change in Sweden, focusing on the act of changing a foreign-sounding surname and the reasons for surname changes given in applications between the years 1925 and 2015. The various reasons are gathered into different types, and their development over time is investigated further. The results show that the most common type of reason is that the applicant's current surname causes problems with pronunciation and/or spelling. There is a clear decline in this type of reason between the 1980s and 2010s, which suggests that it has become less problematic to bear a foreign-sounding surname in Sweden in recent decades. This suggestion is further explored with an investigation of how common it has been to change from a foreign-sounding surname to one based on the Swedish language. This investigation shows that it has become less common to change to a surname based on the Swedish language in recent decades.

Keywords

surname change, family name, last name, Sweden

1. Introduction

The number of surname changes in Sweden during the 20th century has been described as unique in comparison with other countries (see Brylla, 2002, p. 67). Starting in the early 1900s the Swedish government implemented a naming policy that encouraged people with the most common patronymics (e.g., *Andersson*) to change to less common, or preferably unique, surnames.¹ This was due to increasing difficulty for the growing Swedish welfare state to distinguish people in official records. This particular naming policy, aiming for more unique surnames, ended with the naming law in 1982, but surname change has continued to be popular in Sweden.

The topic of this paper, however, is not surname change in Sweden in general. The paper will instead focus on the changing of foreign-sounding surnames in Sweden between the years 1925 and 2015, and the written reasons supplied in applications for those surname changes. The aim of the study presented in this paper is to investigate patterns in these reasons and see if they have changed over time. The material consists of 2,789 applications from six years between 1925 and 2015 and is a part of my ongoing doctoral thesis.

Before continuing with a brief historical overview of some relevant topics, two comments on terminology are in order. First, the term “foreign-sounding surnames” refers here to surnames that are not based on the Swedish language (as further explained in Section 3). The term “foreign surname” does not concern the name bearers’ ethnic background. Secondly, “surname change” includes both changing to a new surname and changing the spelling of one’s current surname.

To place the study in its historical context I will now give a brief historical overview of three topics: naming laws in Sweden, practical aspects of surname change, and finally patterns of immigration to Sweden.

¹ A person who wanted to change to a unique surname could be helped by the lists of surname suggestions that the government issued between 1921 and 1979. On the one hand, one could say that the naming policy was successful. Between the years 1920 and 1946, well over 40,000 new, unique, surnames were created. On the other hand, one could say that the naming policy was not very successful, considering that 19 out of the 20 most common surnames in Sweden today are patronyms.

Three naming laws have been in use during the time period investigated. These are the 1901 regulation of family names (*Släktnamnsförordningen*) and the naming laws of 1963 and 1982 (for more on Swedish naming laws, see Entzenberg, 2006). It will not be possible to go into detail on these laws, but some general remarks can be made. To begin with, all the laws included protection of already existing surnames. This means that a person could not change to a surname that was already in use by another family, which gave the potential surname changer two options: either to change to a surname with which they have a family connection, or to create a completely new surname (for a historical overview of the Swedish naming laws, see e.g., SOU 2013: 35, pp. 137–241).

Secondly, surname change from non-patronymic surnames was regulated up until 1982. This was because, as mentioned earlier, one of the aims of the Swedish naming laws was to get people to stop using the most common surnames. Thirdly, up until 1982, newly formed surnames were required to some extent to be based on the Swedish language. And finally, people with Swedish citizenship or permanent residence were allowed to change their surnames. All of these regulations affected the possibility for people with foreign surnames to get their applications approved and, by extension, perhaps also influenced the likelihood of their filing an application for a surname change. I will briefly return to this later.

Let us now consider some practical aspects of surname change in Sweden. Since 1902, when the regulation on family names of 1901 came into effect, there have been two channels for officially changing one's surname in Sweden: the population registration agency and the naming authority. This paper only investigates applications filed with the naming authority. From 1919 until 1946, the naming authority was the Swedish government; applications were made directly to, and decided by, the government. From 1946 onwards, different Swedish public authorities have served as the naming authority.

Finally, a few comments should be made about immigration to Sweden. During the first half of the 20th century there was little immigration. Starting in 1945, a large number of labour immigrants came to Sweden, mainly from central and eastern Europe, to work in the growing industry. Large-scale labour immigration halted during the mid-1970s, and refugee migration from other parts of the world began. It hardly needs mentioning that the immigrants brought new types of surnames to the country.

The next section will give an overview of earlier research regarding surname change. The material and method of the study are presented in Section 3,

and in Section 4 the results of the study are presented and discussed. In Section 5 some conclusions are drawn, and general remarks on the study are made.

2. Earlier research

Research on surname change has been conducted both in Europe (e.g., Nyström, 2008; Frändén, 2010; Farkas 2012a; 2012b; Panagiotidis, 2015) and North America (e.g., Maass, 1958; Rennick, 1965; Larmouth, 1967; Scherr, 1986; Nogrady, 1990; Hanks, 2003). Earlier research on surname change has in many cases focused on linguistic modifications and adaptations of surnames in a new language context. Since this paper focuses on written reasons for surname changes, the emphasis in this section will be on results from a limited number of studies that have examined such written reasons.

In Sweden, Frändén (2010) and Nyström (2008) have studied the same type of applications for surname changes that I study here. Both studies found that a recurring written reason for the name change was that the surname was too common, and that it therefore caused problems in everyday life (see Nyström, 2008, p. 355; Frändén, 2010, p. 210); these reasons mainly concerned common Swedish patronymics like *Andersson* or *Nilsson*. Frändén (2010) focused on surname change within the Sami community and found that a common reason was that the current surname, often of Finnish or Sami origin, caused problems with pronunciation and spelling (p. 210).

Problems caused by pronunciation and spelling were also a common reason in two studies from the United States concerning court petitions for surname changes dating from the mid-1900s. Zagraniczny (1963, p. 13) stated that “the combination of spelling and pronunciation errors” was the most common reason for the surname change in the 2,513 petitions studied from various states. Similarly, Rennick (1965, p. 152) found that “difficulties in the spelling and/or pronunciation of the original name” is a common reason given in the petitions (concerning changes of both first name and surname).

Somewhat related to problems with pronunciation and spelling is the reason that the name changer desires “economic advantage”, which was identified by Scherr (1986, p. 297) in a study of court petitions in New York City from the

late 19th century. One of these petitioners stated that his current surname led to “financial losses” when his name was misspelled in letters, and mispronunciation of his name “caused him embarrassment in his occupation” (Scherr, 1986, p. 293). In addition, both Zagraniczny (1963, p. 13) and Rennick (1965, p. 152) identify a wish for advantage in business as a common reason for name changes.

The studies presented above, both from Sweden (Frändén, 2010) and the United States (Zagraniczny, 1963; Rennick, 1965; Scherr, 1986), together indicate that problems concerning spelling or pronunciation are a common reason for changing one’s surname, at least according to the written reasons that were studied. A key aspect of the studies referred to above is that they mainly concern surnames that are not derived from the main language spoken in the country where the name change took place. Most of the surname changes studied in the United States were requested by people of Eastern European origin, and, as mentioned earlier, most of the reasons concerning pronunciation and spelling in Frändén (2010) were mentioned with regard to surnames of Finnish or Sami origin. This is important to bear in mind in relation to the study that will be presented in the following sections.

3. Materials and methods

This paper only investigates applications that were filed with the naming authority, and not those filed with the population registration agency. This is mainly because the applications to the latter agency have often either not been preserved or are spread across many different archives. The applications made to the naming authority between the years 1919 and 2017 are easily accessible for research and are gathered in two different archives, in Stockholm and Söderhamn.²

Because surname change has been very common in Sweden, thousands of applications were made each year, and a selection of these is therefore needed.

² In Stockholm the applications are stored in the main archive of the Justice Department at the National Archives and in Söderhamn at the archive of the Swedish Patent and Registration Office.

Firstly, a selection of years for investigation was made. This study investigates applications from five years: 1925, 1945, 1965, 1985 and 2015. These years provide both an overview of name changes during most of the 20th century and enable the investigation of name changes under multiple naming laws (see Section 1). Secondly, a selection of applications within each year was made. The total number of applications investigated is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The number of applications investigated for each year and their share of the total number of applications

Year	Estimated total number of applications	Number of applications investigated	Share of the total number of applications investigated (in %)
1925	1,060	197	18.6
1945	8,000	1,515	18.9
1965	3,600	506	14.1
1985	2,800	345	12.3
2015	7,000	226	3.2

Source: own work.

As can be seen in the table above, the share of applications from the year 2015 is very low. It is therefore important to interpret the data from that year with caution. From the total number of applications investigated, applications to change foreign-sounding surnames, as defined in Section 1, have been extracted, and the share of these applications can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Number of applications that concern changing a foreign-sounding surname and their share of the total number of applications investigated

Year	Number of applications that concern changing a foreign-sounding surname	Share of applications investigated (in %)
1925	2	1.0
1945	22	1.5
1965	32	6.3
1985	69	20.0
2015	55	24.3

Source: own work.

What is striking when studying Table 2 is that the number and share of applications to change a foreign-sounding surname are very low in 1925 and 1945. This is perhaps not surprising, though, due to the low level of immigration to Sweden during these years.

We now turn to a description of the applications themselves. Even though the applications mainly contain the same information over time, the design of the application process has varied. The applications from 1925 and 1945 are mostly letters, which in most cases do not contain a written reason for the name change. From 1965 and onwards, there are printed applications forms that contain a specific box where the applicant is asked to give a reason for the name change. Because of that, most of the applications from 1965 contain reasons for requesting the name change.

Reasons have been extracted from the applications and transcribed into a database, where the applicants' current and desired surnames have also been noted. The reasons have then been studied to enable similar reasons to be clustered into various types. These clusters of reasons are henceforth referred to as "reason types".

Before providing the results, some further comments on how surnames have been identified as "foreign sounding" are needed. As mentioned before, I have labelled as "foreign sounding" all surnames that could not be identified as originating from the Swedish language. But how is a name identified as originating from the Swedish language? To put it shortly, I have used the following three criteria for identifying a surname as "Swedish"³:

- The name contains Swedish words like *berg* (Eng. 'mountain', *Bergström*, *Strömberg*) or *bäck* (Eng. 'stream', *Bäckström*, *Lindbäck*).
- The name contains derivations with a long tradition in Swedish surnames. Two such elements are the Latin endings *-ius* and *-eus* (*Bergius*, *Moraeus*), which have been part of the Swedish surname stock for so long that surnames containing them are perceived to be "Swedish surnames".
- If the names do not meet the two criteria above but are still perceived as Swedish (by the author).

All names that according to the above-mentioned criteria have not been identified as Swedish are labelled as "foreign-sounding surnames". For most of the

³ It should also be mentioned that surnames deriving from the Finnish or Sami languages have a long tradition in Sweden and therefore are "domestic Swedish surnames" although they do not derive from the Swedish language.

Swedish names, the first two criteria have been sufficient. In the case of the third criterion, a certain amount of subjectivity on my part has been involved, but since these names are so few, I am confident that possible misjudgements do not have a strong effect on the investigation as a whole.

4. Name changes involving a foreign-sounding surname, 1925–2015

We now turn to the main topic of this paper: the study of reasons for changing a foreign-sounding surname in Sweden between 1925 and 2015. As previously stated, the study focuses on written reasons supplied in applications for surname change, and its aim is to investigate patterns in these reasons and if the patterns have changed over time. The aim is concretized in two research questions: What written reasons are given in the applications? What patterns can be discerned in these reasons, and have they changed over time? In the following, I will give a brief overview of the three most common reason types, followed by a more elaborate study of the most common reason type. The chapter ends with a discussion of the findings.

4.1. The most common types of reasons

Difficulty with pronunciation and spelling was by far the most common type of reason given in the applications. It occurs in applications from every year between 1925 and 2015. The second most common reason type was that the applicant wished to bear the same name as present or past family members, and the third most common reason type, somewhat related to pronunciation and spelling, was that the current surname caused the name bearer discomfort of some kind.

We will soon return to the most frequently occurring type of reason, but first something must be mentioned about the other two. A wish to bear the same name as present or past family members is expressed in applications for a wide range of name changes, including wishes to bear mothers' maiden names, siblings' surnames, grandparents' surnames, and surnames from earlier generations. (According to a Swedish law of 1963, one is allowed to adopt family surnames from four generations back).

The third most frequent type of reason, that the current surname causes discomfort in some way, is represented by a wide variety of specific reasons. What these have in common is that the applicants express that their current surname causes them discomfort in everyday life in other ways than problems linked to pronunciation and spelling. One name changer expresses the discomfort in the following way (translated from Swedish to English by the author): (1) “I’m fed up with telling our whole family story to every person I meet”. For this applicant, it seems that when his/her surname is introduced he/she is asked to say where the family “comes from”. This is what causes the discomfort, not the spelling or pronunciation of the surname.

4.2. Pronunciation and spelling – development over time and examples

Let us now focus on the type of reason that occurred most often throughout the applications: that the current surname causes problems with pronunciation and spelling. Figure 1 shows the percentage of this reason type in the applications from 1965, 1985 and 2015 concerning foreign-sounding surnames. (As mentioned before, the applications from 1925 and 1945 seldom concern this type of name change, and do not always include a reason).

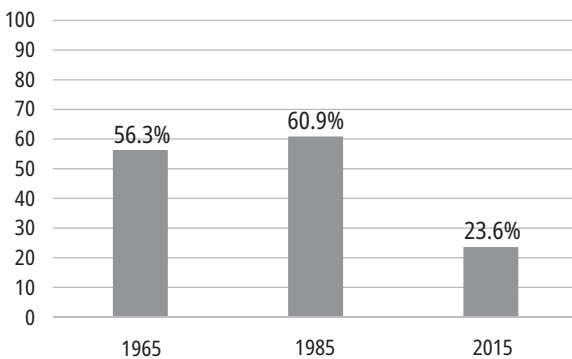


Figure 1. Percentage of applications, from applications to change foreign-sounding surnames, that concern problems with pronunciation and spelling

Source: own work.

Two important observations can be made based on Figure 1. First, in 1965 and 1985 a clear majority of the applications contain reasons that concern pronunciation and spelling. Secondly, there is a clear decline in this type of reason between 1985 and 2015. I will return to these two observations in Section 4.3 but let us first study some selected examples of specific reasons within this reason type.

Many applicants simply say that “the name is hard to pronounce and/or spell”, while others give more elaborate reasons. One applicant writes that (2) “It has even happened that customers have declined business deals because of their problems with my surname. The surname causes irritation both ways, both in private life and in business life”. Another applicant who mentions problems in business caused by the pronunciation and spelling of the surname writes as follows: (3) “Customers’ and guests’ problems with and mispronunciation of the surname often cause problems, especially on the telephone”.

Some applicants argue that the surname change is mostly for the sake of their children, because they are the ones who are most affected by pronunciation and spelling problems. One applicant writes that the surname causes (4) “the child’s classmates to laugh”. Another applicant writes that (5) “[It would be] easier for the children in school with a Swedish surname”.

4.3. Changing from a foreign-sounding surname to one based on the Swedish language

The applications selected for this study suggest that an important driving force behind changing a foreign-sounding surname seems to be problems caused by pronunciation and spelling. This finding is perhaps not surprising, considering the earlier studies conducted in the United States and Sweden that have noted the same phenomenon. One interesting observation from this study is that there seems to have been a clear decline in this particular type of reason between 1985 and 2015 (see Figure 1), which would suggest that it has become less problematic to bear a foreign-sounding surname in Sweden in recent decades.

To investigate this suggestion further, I conducted a small study of how common it has been to change a foreign-sounding surname to one based on the Swedish language, based on the same set of applications. Figure 2 shows the percentage of surname changes from a foreign-sounding surname to a surname based on Swedish.

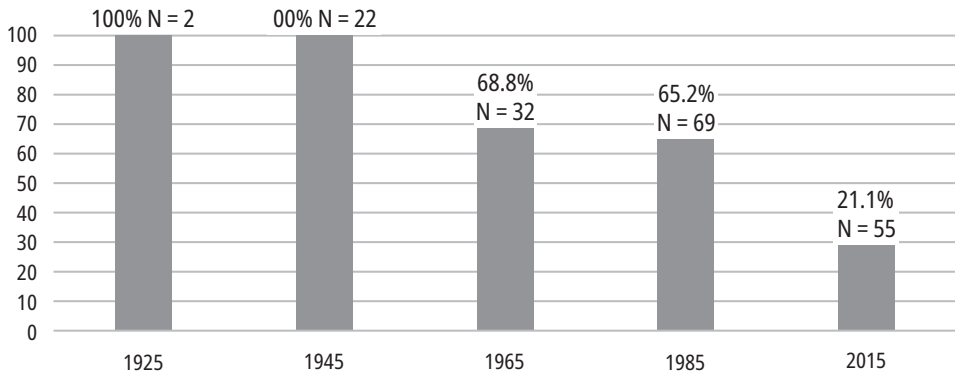


Figure 2. Changes from a foreign-sounding surname to a surname based on the Swedish language

Source: own work.

Again, this type of name change is uncommon in 1925 and 1945, so we can disregard the high percentages from those two years and instead focus on the decline between 1985 and 2015, which is similar to the decline in the reasons concerning pronunciation and spelling shown in Figure 1. This observation might strengthen the suggestion that it has become less problematic to bear a foreign-sounding surname in Sweden in the 2010s, compared to the 1980s and 1960s. The immigration and globalization of the last decades have contributed to making surnames not based on the Swedish language more common in everyday use in Sweden, and this has perhaps led to fewer problems with using a foreign surname. People are simply more used to pronouncing and spelling surnames from different languages today than they were 40 or 50 years ago.

I wish to stress that this does not mean that it is entirely unproblematic to bear a foreign-sounding surname in Sweden. Pronunciation and spelling are still, in 2015, a fairly common reason for name change, and a great deal of the applicants in 2015 still feel the need to take the large step of taking a surname based on a different language than the one they presently have. Regarding this topic, I also wish to refer to a recent study suggesting that changing from a foreign surname to one based on the Swedish language (the study uses the term “neutral sounding”) leads to increased earnings (see Arai & Skogman Thoursie, 2009).

5. Remarks and conclusions

Before drawing conclusions from this study, some remarks should be made on the methods applied and the material used. First, it is not entirely unproblematic to sort the various reasons into different types. One could argue that reasons concerning pronunciation and spelling problems are hard to distinguish from ones that concern discomfort more generally (see example 1). Do problems with pronunciation and spelling not also cause discomfort? Yes, that is probably the case, but the distinction has been made here because, for instance, example (1) mentions other sources of discomfort than just the practical problems with pronunciation and spelling that are mentioned in example (2).

Secondly, the written reasons are often short and do not give elaborate explanations of why the surname change is requested. Perhaps the applicant only wrote what he/she thought that the authorities wanted to hear, in order to get the application approved. Studies of the written reasons combined with interviews could perhaps shed more light on the reasons behind a surname change, and perhaps on how different reasons can work together. And thirdly, as pointed out earlier, the share of applications from 2015 is low compared to those from earlier years, and this could have had an effect on the results.

However, bearing all this in mind, the study has shown, in line with earlier studies, that problems with pronunciation and spelling are an important driving force behind surname change. This is especially the case with surnames that are not based on the main language in the society where the applicant resides. In Sweden, pronunciation and spelling make up the most common type of reason for changing a foreign-sounding surname, at least in the applications studied here, though this type of reason has declined in recent decades.

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