**Terhi Ainiala**

✉ terhi.ainiala@helsinki.fi

ⓘD https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4998-9983

⌂ University of Helsinki

🌐 Helsinki, Finland

**Emilia Aldrin**

✉ emilia.aldrin@hh.se

ⓘD https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8085-1419

⌂ Halmstad University

🌐 Halmstad, Sweden

**Birgit Eggert**

✉ beggert@hum.ku.dk

ⓘD https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8454-7430

⌂ University of Copenhagen

🌐 Copenhagen, Denmark

# New Trends in Nordic Socio-onomastics: International Cooperation and Examples of Objectives

## Abstract

The recently founded Nordic network New Trends in Nordic Socio-Onomastics was started as a workshop program in 2018 and 2019, funded by The Joint Committee for Nordic Research Councils in the Humanities and Social Sciences. The aim was to stimulate innovative research development within the socio-onomastic field by enabling Nordic researchers to come together, participate in discussions, explore new theoretical and methodological tools and identify new problem areas suitable for future joint Nordic projects. In this article, we present the network and the activities that have been organized in order to enhance international collaboration. We also discuss the current state of socio-onomastics in the Nordic countries and identify some important objectives and areas for future research.

## 1. Introduction

Name research – including socio-onomastic research – is a small research field and in the Nordic region there are few researchers in each country. Therefore, a joint Nordic network has an important role to play in creating a critical mass and options for the benefits of a focused thought. Furthermore, in the Nordic countries, we have considerable similarities in name use and in the connection between names and social structures. This can be exploited by studying name use from a joint Nordic basis of uniform issues. At the same time, there are also important differences among the Nordic countries, which are interesting to examine in both the historical and contemporary perspective. Nordic name researchers have conducted a fairly large amount of socio-onomastic research using different angles, materials, and theoretical foundations. However, research collaboration between Nordic socio-onomastic scholars has been rare. Therefore, we set out to create a research network focusing on new trends in Nordic socio-onomastics and thus stimulate enhanced collaboration and innovative research development within the field. In so doing, we also try to support the field's future adaptation to modern conditions, taking advantage of recent work in adjacent fields of research. In this article, we describe the formation of the network, its goals and activities, and we will identify some conclusions with the aim of inspiring and supporting the formation of further onomastic networks.

## 2. Background

Socio-onomastics can be defined as the sociolinguistic study of names (see Figure 1). It examines the use and variety of names through methods that demonstrate the social, cultural, and situational conditions in name usage. It focuses on name use in human interaction, i.e. topics such as variation in name use, why some names are avoided, which consequences a name can cause for the name bearer, how the name users themselves perceive their own name use,

as well as attitudes toward names and name use. Names are significant parts of society because they are linked to human, place and commercial identities and thus may affect ambient notions of identities and relationships – also at the macro level in a society. Names can reflect important social structures and help us understand structural problems, and through the study of historical material we can better understand what is going on in the present (Ainiala, 2016, pp. 371–372; Ainiala & Östman, 2017, pp. 2–9).

The interest in socio-onomastics began in the 1970s (see e.g., Walther, 1971, p. 45; Witkowski, 1975, p. 60; Seibicke, 1982, p. 11; Naumann, 1984/1989, pp. 394–395), and since then research has been conducted on the topic with varied intensity within the Nordic region. In general, socio-onomastic research has introduced the multifaceted issue of variety into onomastics. Research has mostly focused on synchronic variation, even though diachronic variation has also been studied. In the field of synchronic variation, particularly social variation has been of interest to many researchers, and even situational and style variation have been touched upon. Various names and name categories have been under examination (Ainiala, 2016; Ainiala & Östman, 2017).
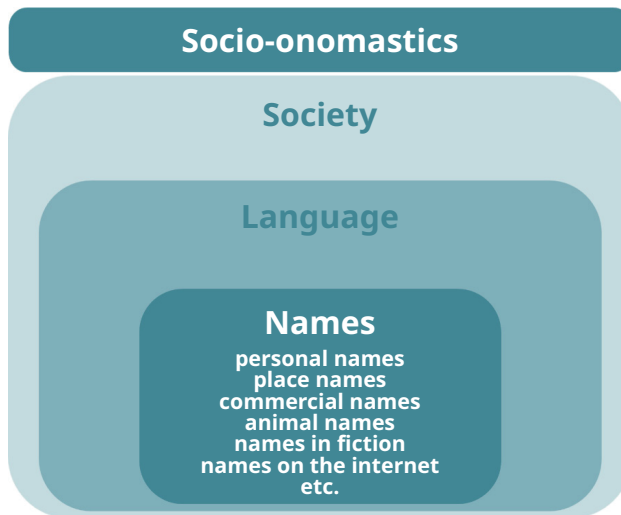


**Figure 1. Illustration showing how socio-onomastics unites the scholarly study of society, language and names**

Graphics: Bo Nissen Knudsen.

The social variation in place names is the main topic in the study of toponymic competence. In studying people's toponymic competence, the aim is to find out how many and what types of place names people of different ages, backgrounds, professions, and genders know in their home districts. Furthermore, the reasons for knowing names for specific places are also studied. Most of the studies in this topic have focused on rural villages rather than on towns or cities. In urban surroundings, in turn, situational variation has been investigated and people's attitudes and stances towards local names and name use examined in multiple ways. The latter studies can also be characterized as folk onomastic studies as part of socio-onomastics (Ainiala & Östman, 2017, pp. 9–11).

Socio-onomastic research into personal names also comprises the study of variation in the popularity of names. The distribution of first name innovations (i.e., name fashion) has been a particular focus of study, but also name variation in different social classes and ethnic minorities, emphasizing issues of power and status. In addition, name-giving grounds as well as naming practices are also regarded as falling within the sphere of socio-onomastic study. Situational variation is also prominent in the field of personal names: various names and name variants are used in different contexts. (Ainiala & Östman, 2017, pp. 8–9).

When it comes to studies of contemporary material, socio-onomastics uses both qualitative methods, such as interviews, ethnographic fieldwork and conversations, and quantitative methods, such as questionnaires. In socio-onomastic studies on personal names, statistical data of names and name bearers is often used. Data regarding naming motivations, name usage and attitudes toward names are also collected through surveys and interviews. Moreover, current studies make use of the possibilities of digital data collection and crowd sourcing. It is also possible to develop new methods for statistical analyses in accordance with existing tools that are used within other fields of research (Ainiala, 2016, p. 373).

Despite the multifaceted research in socio-onomastics so far, many areas have still hardly been touched upon. In the socio-onomastic study of place names, rural names have already been in focus for decades, but urban names still lack comprehensive research: in what ways are place names – both official and unofficial – used in multi-layered and often multilingual urban environments? How are places and companies named and modified to suit various groups in such urban environments? Similar questions apply to the study of

personal names: how are they used in multilingual contexts? For example, studies on naming and name use in two- and multi-lingual families and the use of place names in multilingual environments are highly relevant and can help us to understand and analyze different groups' and people's identification with an area and with a society.

Research into commercial names is still rather scarce due to the young age of the field, and socio-onomastic studies in this field are few. One of the most interesting questions is the study of the attitudes and stances people have towards commercial names and how people talk about commercial products and businesses in actual language use. Another area of development is how the use of names may reflect different social groups, including minority inclusion or exclusion in society. Furthermore, digitalization brought new opportunities for people to create their own name and thus affect how they want to be identified by others, which could potentially have far-reaching consequences for human relations and approaches to names. However, this is still a relatively unexplored topic in socio-onomastics.

Socio-onomastics is a versatile branch of research, and various methods and materials may be applied (see Figure 2). By combining historical and contemporary materials, we can understand contemporary issues in a larger perspective, allow for a more problematized understanding of the phenomenon by diachronic perspectives and gain new insights into which name patterns have historically led to which consequences, thereby perceiving a better understanding of the present. Even though onomastics is multidisciplinary in its very nature, this characterization probably suits socio-onomastics even better. In examining the use and variation of names and names' multiple roles and functions in society, we are encouraged to take various disciplines' perspectives into account and also collaborate with other researchers. In so doing, we can gain a better understanding of the reasons behind certain onomastic phenomena. Several new theories and methods have also emerged recently in related research areas, such as linguistic landscape studies and multimodal analysis, which have the potential to contribute to a new development in the field of socio-onomastics. In the frames of this Nordic network, we wanted to kick-start this new development and provide the basis for a forum of researchers who can develop the field across the Nordic countries, with the help of multiple perspectives.

**Figure 2. Illustration from nordicsocioonomastics.org showing the many scholarly disciplines that can be part of socio-onomastics**

Graphics: Bo Nissen Knudsen.

## 3. Formation of the Nordic network for socio-onomastics

In the Nordic countries, we have – as mentioned above – considerable similarities in name use and names' connections to social structures. This can be exploited by studying name use from a joint Nordic basis of uniform issues. At the same time, there are also important differences between the Nordic countries, which are interesting to examine in both the historical and contemporary perspective. An example is reflected by Emilia Aldrin (2011) and Katrine K. Bechsgaard (2015) who have studied parents' choice of names for children in contemporary Sweden and Denmark. They reveal a lot of similarities, but also interesting differences. Certain socio-economic factors seem to have a different effect on name choice in Sweden and Denmark and the parents' attitudes to certain characteristics of the name varies both between the countries as a whole and between similar socio-economic groups in the two countries.

Similarities and differences such as these are interesting to elucidate through collaboration between researchers in the different countries; more dimensions in the analyses can be used for further conclusions than in typical studies focusing on a specific country. This can be facilitated by the establishment of a research network that in the Nordic countries is further helped by the linguistic situation; the Scandinavian languages Danish, Norwegian and Swedish are mutually intelligible, and in addition to this many Finns, Faroese and Icelanders understand Scandinavian languages. Thus, the majority of the participants can speak their mother tongue and this is a valuable strength in a long-term collaboration.

In 2017, we applied and received funding from The Joint Committee for Nordic research councils in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NOS-HS) for the formation of a Nordic network for socio-onomastics. The main goals for the project were to:

(a)  Start a network, allowing researchers to meet in creative, innovative forms.
(b)  Identify problem areas based on new theories and methods suitable for joint Nordic projects and future applications holders.
(c)  Create a website as a platform for network discussions and for communication with the wider community.

During 2018 and 2019, a workshop series was conducted with the primary objective of establishing the network as a way to stimulate innovative research development in the field within the Nordic region. During the workshops we wanted to enable researchers from different Nordic countries to come together to be inspired by recent theoretical and methodological developments within adjacent fields in new, creative ways. Apart from university researchers, people from government agencies and archives also participated as well as a number of junior researchers.

## 4. Network activities and outcomes

The basis of the network foundation was a workshop programme during 2018 and 2019 that aimed to encourage the participants to explore new theoretical perspectives relevant for socio-onomastic studies, as well as new methodological tools suitable for contemporary synchronic, historical and diachronic socio-onomastic studies. The first workshop focused on theory, the research area's current "state of the art", as well as new theoretical perspectives and concepts used in relevant adjacent fields. The two subsequent workshops focused on methods. During the workshops, experts were invited to give presentations, discussions were held in smaller and bigger groups on the benefits, possibilities, challenges and other implications of the topics at hand, and hands-on practical exercises were carried out. At the end of each workshop, all participants joined in an overall and more targeted discussion

of what was learnt. In total, 22 Nordic researchers participated in one or more of the three workshops.

Each workshop had a specific focus:

(1) New theoretical perspectives relevant for socio-onomastic studies.
(2) New methodological tools relevant for contemporary onomastic studies.
(3) New methodological tools relevant for historical onomastic studies.

The first workshop was held in Helsinki, Finland, in October 2018, and here the participants familiarized themselves with new theoretical tendencies in neighbouring disciplines through Finnish guest speakers in: pragmatics, sociolinguistics, folk linguistics, and socio-onomastics and name planning, to get a good picture of what had been done so far and what could and should be done and which theoretical approaches would be the most relevant.

The second workshop was held in Halmstad, Sweden, in March 2019, and the focus was on exploring new methodological tools that are suitable for the study of contemporary name materials. Swedish guest speakers with expertise and deep experience of the individual methods were invited. The methods presented included ethnography and web-ethnography, participatory visual methods and quantitative statistics using factor and SEM analysis. We also had a "hands on" practice with a virtual reality environment, green screen video recording, and usage of interactive screen display in the Digital Laboratory Centre at Halmstad University.

The third workshop was held in Copenhagen, Denmark, in October 2019. Here, the focus was on methods for socio-onomastic research on historical name material. Present were Danish guest speakers with expertise in crowd sourcing, digitization of big historical name data, and linking the same person in different sources, and with expertise in what Iron Age personal names combined with archeology can tell us about social identity and culture. We also had a "hands on" practice with quantitative data from Danish digitised censuses.

In the workshop series participants on doctoral and postdoctoral level from all the participating countries were included, as well as several other early-stage researchers. These young scientists carry out socio-onomastic research, and many of them focus on new perspectives within the research field. Everyone included in the project participated on equal terms regardless of seniority. The younger researchers represent an important resource for the field's potential for development and innovation, and the workshops as well

as the subsequent research network will give the young scholars a stronger position in their future research situation. For the PhD students, the workshop series was an important part of their research training, and for the young postdocs it gave an opportunity to create their own Nordic research projects and research groups.

## 5. The network website

Already from the beginning of the project, a website was established: nordic-socioonomastics.org. The website presents information on the network, network activities and the field of socio-onomastics. An important part of the website is a blog, where network participants publish 2–3 posts per month on a multitude of socio-onomastic topics. Since October 2018, 60 posts have been published. Posts are published either in any of the Scandinavian languages or in English and are directed both at fellow researchers and a wider group of non-scientific readers interested in socio-onomastic topics.

The most frequent tags of blog posts (as of August 2021) show that the network embraces many different angles:

- Personal names (24);
- Place-names (17);
- Socio-onomastic activities (16);
- Urban names (11);
- Historical socio-onomastics (10);
- Network activities (10);
- Projects relevant for socio-onomastics (8);
- Workshops (6);
- Teaching (5);
- New publications on socio-onomastics (4);
- Names and branding (3);
- Data materials suitable for socio-onomastics (3);
- Socio-onomastic theory (1).

## 6. Research ideas

An ongoing activity within the network has been to identify ideas suitable for future socio-onomastic research in joint Nordic projects. During the workshops, many small and large investigations were proposed and several ideas for future Nordic projects with the potential for funding crystallized. By discussing the research that was already underway among the participants, it became clear that there were many common areas of interest and points of contact within the network. Not all projects must be financed externally; small-scale collaborations and case studies from different countries are also important.

Towards the end of the workshop series, we formed six thematic groups within the network based on the previous discussions on research interests among the participants. Each network participant was invited to join one or more of these groups and each thematic group decided on the forms for further collaborations. These include regular meetings with discussions, reading groups, planning of joint projects as well as collaborations with the aim of producing joint applications for funding etc. The current thematic groups within the network (as of August 2021) are:

- Trends in Personal Names;
- What is a Name?;
- Minority and Multilingualism;
- Name and Nationalism;
- Digital landscape in the Nordic Countries;
- Names in writing.

## 7. Future aims

Our aim was always that the network should continue even after the funding had ended. For the future, we want to continue socio-onomastic knowledge development in the Nordic region and make further progress in theories,

methods, data and implications. We also aim to further improve the collabo-
rations between Nordic socio-onomastic researchers as well as to increase the
visibility of socio-onomastics in both scientific and public spheres. In order
to achieve this, we are planning a number of activities:

- Maintain a vivid website with an active blog written by network members
  reaching out to a wide group of (scientific as well as non-scientific) readers.
- Continue working in subgroups within the network that focus on differ-
  ent socio-onomastic topics and arrange regular digital meetings, discus-
  sions, reading-groups etc.
- Invite more PhD-students and early career researchers to enrich the net-
  work.
- Develop current research project ideas into joint Nordic applications and
  publications.
- Establish a socio-onomastic journal: NoSo – *Nordisk tidskrift för socioono-
  mastik / Nordic Journal of Socio-Onomastics* (see Figure 3) as a platform
  for continued scientific discussions on socio-onomastic issues and there-
  by bridging the Nordic network of socio-onomastics with research from
  other parts of the world and other disciplines.[1]

Many of these activities have already been initiated and we hope to see the
results of their impact within the next few years. We can also see certain chal-
lenges that need to be handled within the network in the future. One chal-
lenge that was identified by the participating researchers during the workshop
series was ethical considerations in socio-onomastic research. Names are often
both public and, in a sense, very private, through their close link to identity.
Personal names constitute a form of personal data, and the recent Europe-
an law (GDPR) has established certain requirements for handling such data
including active consent. However, even with consent from research partici-
pants, it is not self-evident that they have fully understood the consequences
of participating in socio-onomastic research. Similarly, it is not self-evident
that people understand the consequences of publishing posts in public inter-
net sources such as social media, which raises ethical questions when using
such data in socio-onomastic research.

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[1] Issues of the NoSo journal are available in open access at https://publicera.kb.se/noso

Another ethical issue concerns the handling of uncommon names that may pose problems even in the use of certain public register data. These issues need to be further discussed within the socio-onomastic network. Other challenges that we see as needing to be handled within the network in the future are related to multidisciplinary collaborations and optimisation of research findings. Names and naming constitute a multidimensional phenomenon and by including perspectives from disciplines other than linguistics, we can gain a broader understanding of their significance and allow for a more complex and problematized view on socio-onomastic phenomena. Furthermore, multidisciplinary collaborations are often required in larger research applications as is a plan for how research findings can be applied and optimised. Socio-onomastic knowledge is important in many contexts. Names are central in geographical orientation, in history, human culture, social interaction, etc., but socio-onomasticians have not always been successful in explaining the relevance of their research and how research findings can be used outside academia. In order to develop the field of socio-onomastics and its position in the Nordic region we need to increase collaboration with other disciplines as well as with actors outside of academia.
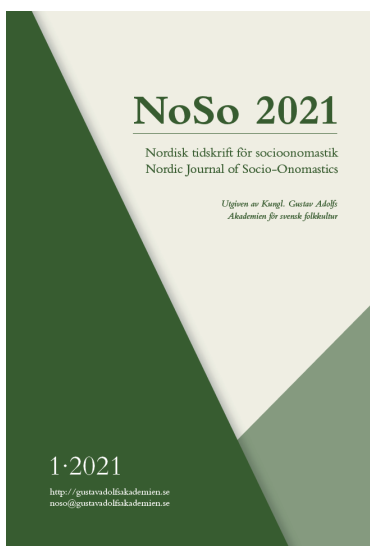


**Figure 3. The front page of the first issue of NoSo –** *Nordisk tidskrift för socioonomastik / Nordic Journal of Socio-Onomastics* **in 2021**

## 8. Conclusions

The formation of a socio-onomastic network kick-started a creative process in the Nordic region. As organizers, we believe that the possibility for researchers with common interests to meet and engage in new ways was an important part of the success. The invitation of experts holding lectures on interesting new perspectives and methods from different fields, which was followed by hands-on laborations, played a significant part in creating an inspiring environment that differed from that of ordinary conference meetings. The most crucial element in the network formation, however, was probably the extensive possibilities for researchers to take part in discussions with the explicit focus to advance socio-onomastic research as a field in the Nordic region. A combination of free discussions and ones that were more structured, in both smaller and larger groups, helped us to identify common interests and possibilities as well as needs and challenges. Finally, yet importantly, the creation of a website and blog enabled us to maintain the network as a common platform and base for knowledge dissemination and interaction even after the completion of the workshop series.

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