# New Names for Municipalities Merging from Two or More Villages or Towns

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## Abstract

For some decades many villages in the Netherlands have been merging into new municipalities. These new entities need a new name. The central assumption in this contribution is that every participating village or town will try to get its name accepted as (part of) the new name.

By means of several examples some factors will be demonstrated which can play a part in the process of establishing a new name, like differences in the size of the population of the participants, differences in age, or their place in alphabetical order.

Attention will be paid to two types of new names that are chosen. The simplest solution is maintaining the name of one or more of the participants, but there is an important restriction: the new name should not be too long, and can do right only by few participants.

An increasingly popular method is choosing a wholly new name, often referring to some shared geographic or historical feature, like a river, a castle or a hillcrest. This method has the advantage that none of the participants loses face.

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## Introduction

For several decades, many villages in the Netherlands have been merging into new municipalities, just like in some other countries. These new entities need a name, of course – but which one is to be chosen? The central assumption in this paper will be that every participating village or town will try to get its name accepted as the new name, or at least as a part of it. Traditionally, this problem was solved this way: the new entity was named for the biggest participant. In the nineteenth century another possibility came into use: the name of the second biggest participant was added, and a double name came to birth, like Arcen en Velden and Echt-Susteren.

But concatenating existing names caused a new problem: in which order will they be put? It turned out that there were three possible solutions. One of them was, putting the biggest participant first, followed by the next-biggest, etcetera. For example: Gemert-Bakel (Gemert 14,000, Bakel 5,000 inhabitants).

Another solution was presenting the names in alphabetical order. Especially if participants had about the same size, following alphabetical order used to be a suitable way to avoid unprofitable discussions. Sometimes the consequence would be that a small participant would take the first position in the new name. I give some examples [Wikipedia (Dutch version)]:

| | |
|---|---|
| EDAM-VOLENDAM | Edam 7,000, Volendam 21.000 (Town hall in Volendam) |
| GILZE EN RIJEN | Gilze 7,000, Rijen 18,000 (Town hall in Rijen) |
| GULPEN-WITTEM | both about 8,000 inhabitants (Town hall in Gulpen) |

Even then, piling up names in this way meets with practical restrictions, for the new name should not be too long, or else it would be quite a mouthful, hard to remember, and some technical

problems would arise. For instance, the new name wouldn't fit on address labels. So, this naming method can do right by a limited number of participants only. In fact, three seems to be the maximum. At this moment I only know one example of a threefold name: NUENEN, GERWEN EN Nederwetten.

To be sure: the clash of interests might be subdued, for instance, if the 'winner' paid some 'small change' to the 'losing' party. The winner might reward one or more of the other participants by making concessions on a different level. For instance, the city hall, or the police station, or the mayor's residence, would be located in one of the other participants in the new municipality. Only in exceptional cases is it a smaller participant that supplies the name. This is what the small town of Bronkhorst (150 inhabitants) did. In this case the other villages were able to avoid loss of face by favouring the smallest partner of them all, and allowing the underdog to win, negotiating at its best.

Despite all these techniques to avoid naming conflicts or loss of face, it seems that all these traditional solutions have been losing ground in the last three or four decades, at least in the Netherlands.[1] One of the causes might be that the number of participants is sometimes quite impressive. This means that most of them will not be represented in the new name. In other words, these participants will necessarily get the short end of the stick.

Because of this disadvantage, a third kind of solution has become increasingly popular in the Netherlands, namely choosing a name that as such is not identical with the name (or names) of one, respectively more participants. This solution has the advantage that none of the participants loses face, not even the smallest hamlet involved.

It stands out, however, that this solution is only rarely employed in Flanders, the Dutch speaking part of Belgium. In the Netherlands, there were in all 443 municipalities at the beginning of last year. 70 of these have names that didn't figure on the list of municipal names before the municipalities involved merged. That comes down to 15 percent of all municipal names in the Netherlands. The 68 names do not include compositional names like Nuenen, Gerwen en Nederwetten.

Flanders has 308 municipalities, 13 of which had new names that were comparable to the 70 Dutch ones; which means that they make up here only 4.3 percent of the total number of municipalities. The conclusion is that there is a huge discrepancy in this respect between the two Dutch speaking territories as far as the naming process is concerned.

## Formulation of the problem

In this paper, I will first consider the ways in which such names that are not concatenations of existing municipal names are established. Some patterns of devising these new names can be observed, and will be discussed.

Secondly, I will propose an explanation for the large discrepancy between the Netherlands and Flanders. In addition, I will work out how far this hypothesis would also explain the naming behaviour of other countries or cultures. In this context I will take the situation of the Canadian province of Ontario into account.

## Method

The internet contains a digital list of all municipal names in the Netherlands (http://www.metatopos.org/) and Flanders.[2] First, it was figured out from which year each municipal name dates.[3] Second, it was examined which of the present names were the result of an amalgamation, and if so, which were the participants.

**Analysis**

An overview of the list of such completely new Dutch municipal names shows that the names chosen mostly refer to some shared geographic or historical feature, like a river, a castle, a hillcrest. Or even the original written form of the name, as it was found in historical documents. Some of these names are, in fact, not new at all, they just were not attributed to any municipality.

**Shared features**

| New Name | Based on: |
|---|---|
| ALBRANDSWAARD | former seigniory named 'Albrantswaard and Kijvelanden' |
| LANDERD | medieval dike, for defence purposes |
| OOST GELRE | 'Eastern Gelre'. *Gelre* was the old name of the actual province of Gelderland |
| RIJNWAARDEN | foreland (*uiterwaarden*) of the river Rhine |
| TEYLINGEN | The castle of Teylingen, located in one of the participants |
| UTRECHTSE HEUVELRUG | All participants lie on a hill crest in the province of Utrecht (*heuvel* = hill) |
| WATERLAND | existing name for the region concerned |
| ZAANSTAD | Nearly all participants lie on the river Zaan (*stad* = city) |

Another category of new names are those with the suffix *–land*, preceded by the name of the most important participant: 'the land around X'. One could argue there is very little difference between this solution and the classical habit of choosing the biggest village or town, but in some miraculous way this solution works. Everybody involved seems happy whenever the suffix *–land* appears. This was the case when one town and two villages, respectively called Steenwijk, IJsselham and Brederwiede were on the point of merging and looking for a new name.

STEENWIJKERLAND    consisting of:

          Steenwijk        (17,000 inhabitants)
          IJsselham        (unknown)
          Brederwiede    (unknown)
           .................................
          total          22,000 inhabitants

The villagers refused to agree on a name that might suggest that they were being swallowed up by the town of Steenwijk, and strongly preferred names like *Noorden van Overijssel* (= North of Overijssel; Overijssel being the name of the province). But they did readily agree on the name Steenwijkerland ('land of Steenwijk'), and this last name was the final result of the deliberations.

The wish to avoid naming conflicts makes people inventive. In the Netherlands it also gave birth to a name that embodies a contamination of existing names: Bellingwedde (since 1968). The name looks quite self-evident or natural, or let's say harmless; it would seem to mean 'wood of the kin of Belle'. Nothing suggests that this name was fabricated out of the names of the two participants: Bellingwolde and Wedde (*wedde* means 'wood', just like *wolde*). Just to demonstrate the procedure: it would be like merging *Toronto* and *Montreal* into *Torontreal*.

Bellingwedde, then, is a syllable-based name. This type of name is certainly not unprecedented, at least not outside the Netherlands. In South Africa, there is Soweto (South Western Township), and the name of Pasadena (United States), however Spanish it may seem, shows the initial syllables of the names of four Indian tribes that are supposed to have lived there. And there are names like Texarkana, on the state lines of Texas, Arkansas and Louisiana.

The possibility that this sort of name has a promising future, at least in the Netherlands, is not quite imaginary. Recently, three municipalities that were planning to amalgamate, organized a

competition in which all inhabitants could propose a new name and voted on it. The response was overwhelming, and it stood out that many people had been playing around with the existing names of the participants.

## Proposals for a new name

Participating villages:
- Aarle-Rixtel
- Beek en Donk
- Lieshout

Some of the proposals for a new name
- Aarledonkhout
- Aarle-Liesdonk
- Aardonksehout
- Beekaardseveld
- Beek en Aarhout.

Nevertheless, the winner of the contest turned out to be LAARBEEK, a combination of *Laar* (name of a hamlet in the centre of the new municipality) and *beek* ('brook'). Several brooks are running through the municipality.

The enthusiastic response to the competition suggests there would be a sufficient social basis for this kind of name play, which – no matter how unesthetical it might be judged to be – has the great advantage of allowing a large number of participants to connect their name to the new entity. Nevertheless: up till now, the example of Bellingwedde has only been copied once: the name of BERNHEZE was probably derived from *Bernissche Hoeven* and *Heesch*.

I have been trying to give an impression about the ways merging municipalities in the Netherlands try to cope with naming conflicts. Now I will try to place the Dutch data in a wider perspective, by comparing them with data I collected about place names in Flanders, the Dutch speaking part of Belgium.

The question may be asked: what is the cause of this huge difference between the Netherlands and Flanders? I would like to propose here an explanation which is connected to the work of Geert Hofstede (Hofstede 1980), an organizational psychologist. In the seventies, Hofstede, then an employee of IBM, made a large scale inquiry among IBM-employees in over 50 countries, sending out extensive questionnaires about the way they experienced their working environment. Trying to make some sense of the answers, he then constructed five independent scales (dimensions) against which any one countries' position could be uniquely plotted.

Although originally geared towards organisational structures, Hofstede's work has subsequently been widely used to explain, or at least underpin, all kinds of political, social and cultural differences between countries.

These are the five dimensions Hofstede used:

**Five dimensions of difference between cultures, according to Hofstede**

power distance, i.e., the measure in which a given community shows social inequality and hierarchy. Arab countries for instance score high on this point, Scandinavia low.

individualism versus collectivism. The USA for instance scores high, Japan scores low.

masculinity versus femininity, i.e., the measure in which traditionally masculine or feminine qualities are appreciated. Masculine qualities are, among others, competitiveness, assertiveness, ambition and accumulation of wealth. Feminine qualities are modest behaviour, helpfulness, and solidarity. Japan is in Hofstede's opinion the most masculine nation, Sweden the most feminine one.

prevention of insecurity: the measure in which insecurity is avoided by giving rules, formal procedures and rituals. Mediterranean countries and Japan score high.

thinking on a long or short term. This is overall an East West difference. The East thinks on the long term in developing and applying innovations and is patient, the West focuses on immediate results.

In my opinion, the striking difference between Dutch and Flemish naming practices may be seen in connection with Hofstede's observations regarding 'feminine' vs. 'masculine' cultures. In 'feminine' cultures conflicts are preferably solved by negotiating and compromising and, not by fighting; in 'masculine' cultures we see the opposite. And in 'feminine' cultures, managers use their intuition and strive for consensus; in 'masculine' ones they are supposed to be resolute and assertive. Hofstede found that the Netherlands scores low on Hofstede's 'masculinity scale' (14), while Flanders scores considerably higher (45). Two cultures separated by the same language, one might say with an allusion to Walter Besant.

What about Canada? Does Canada produce many municipal names of the compromise type? And how do the results relate to Hofstede's masculinity scale?

Let's first take a look at Hofstede's observations on Canada. The French part of Quebec scores 45 on the masculinity scale (Hofstede 2001). The author gives no separate figure for the English speaking part of Canada. But it might be about 33, because Canada as a whole scores 39. It seems reasonable to assume that the whole nation scores right between the extremes. English speaking Canada, then, is more masculine than the Netherlands, but less so than Flanders.

Do these results fit in with the way English speaking Canada solves its municipality naming conflicts (supposing there are any)? I will restrict myself to the province of Ontario, hoping this offers a somewhat reliable image of English speaking Canada. Right now, Ontario has, to my knowledge, about 445 municipalities. During the last decade, many municipalities have merged, a process resulting in more than 200 new municipal names, to be found on the 'municipal restructuring activity summary table' from (I suppose) 2007, which offers an overview of merging municipalities in Ontario, including the names they are going to carry (http://www.mah.gov.on.ca/Page1594.aspx).

Of these 200 names, 40 were new, i.e., they contained one or more toponymic elements that were different from the names of any of the participants. Forty names on a total number of 445 Ontario names – that is about 10 percent of all municipal names in Ontario. This implies that Ontario scores right between Flanders and the Netherlands, which was exactly what our hypothesis predicts.

**Conclusion**

In this study the basic assumption was that establishing a name for a newly merged municipality implies a problem: every participant will try to get its name accepted as the new name. So, basically we deal here with naming conflicts.

The results of these naming conflicts in the Netherlands are very different from those in Flanders. I propose that the explanation is found in the work of Geert Hofstede. He describes the Netherlands as having a "feminine" culture, that is, tending to solve conflicts in a relatively gentle way, and with a particular attention to avoiding loss of face for any of the participants. Flanders has a "masculine" culture, which implies that it tends to solve conflicts in a more "winner takes all" fashion.

The analysis of the data on Ontario seems to confirm this hypothesis, so the suggestion might be made that the given correlation might also apply to other cultures than the ones of the Netherlands and Flanders.

**Notes**

1. A thorough survey on German names for new municipalities is already to be found in Frank 1977. In that study, however, no attention was paid to possibly underlying mechanisms, like the need to solve name conflicts.

2. A list of Flemish municipalities is to be found at
http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lijst_van_gemeenten_in_het_Vlaams_Gewest

3. Van der Meer and O. Boonstra (2006) present the complete list of all municipal names that have ever existed in the Netherlands, mentioning the year from which the names date. If a municipality was the result of an amalgamation, the participant municipalities are mentioned. So, the genesis of all municipal names can be reconstructed.

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