

Place names, landscapes, languages

1. In Mortselsel – the suburb of Antwerp where I grew up – there is a place that is popularly called ‘the-bridge-that-is-gone’ (*de-brug-die-weg-is*). ‘Where do you live?’ ‘At the-bridge-that-is-gone’. I know the place name from my mother’s family, but I have never known the actual bridge, it had already been demolished by the time I was born.
2. Topographical maps sometimes contain such popular place names – of a field, a crossroad, the edge of a forest ... How did they make it to the map, I sometimes wonder. It is not the kind of data that you can gather with an aerial photograph. Did cartographers roam the land and ring people’s bell? And do such place-name collectors still exist, or are the popular names only copied from older maps? The latter would mean that new popular names are no longer included and that out-of-use place names are still there on the map.
3. Place names do not change that fast. It is often possible to derive the origin of a village from its name; whether it was founded, for instance, during the times of the early Celtic language, or the late Celtic, or Latin, or old German, or medieval Dutch. The languages changed, the names stayed more or less the same. This proves that some people also stayed; a new language only meant a new centre of power. Place names reveal the languages that were spoken at certain places in the past, just as facial characteristics can reveal traces of former inhabitants in the genes.
4. The other day I was staying at the place of a friend of a friend in the Zonstraat in Utrecht, the Netherlands. Close to my guest house I discovered a memorial stone with the inscription: ‘Here rests the discontent of the neighbourhood, 15 May 1985’. Absolutely nobody in the street could give me any information about this stone. All inhabitants had come to live there after that date, and they didn’t know anything about the former inhabitants of the street – they hardly knew their current neighbours. They were just stranded together in the same street like you might happen to sit together in the departure hall of an airport – an airport that is called after a former president.