

GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES AS LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

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Abstract

This article examines the concept of toponyms, their linguistic nature, classification, and the process of toponymization. Particular attention is given to the role of geographical names in identifying and distinguishing geographical objects, as well as their significance as carriers of historical, cultural, and linguistic information. The study discusses the main branches of toponymy, including hydronymy, oronymy, oikonymy, microtoponymy, ethnotoponymy, and anthrotoponymy. Furthermore, the article explores the transformation of common nouns into proper geographical names through the processes of concretization and individualization. It is argued that toponyms constitute valuable linguistic and cultural heritage, preserving evidence of historical events, ethnic identities, and ancient language layers.

Keywords: Toponymy, toponym, geographical name, toponymization, hydronym, oronym, oikonym, microtoponym, ethnotoponym, anthrotoponym, proper noun, appellative, linguocultural studies, linguistic heritage, geographical nomenclature.

Introduction

Everything in the world has a name. In addition to local names for plants and animals, they also have scientific Latin names. Specialists of different nationalities can immediately identify any plant or animal by its Latin name. Thus, names help distinguish one thing from another.

People have also created names to distinguish one place from another, one stream from another stream, one street from a neighboring street, as well as mountains, hills, cities, and villages from one another.

Place names, geographic names, or toponyms, are studied by the science of toponymy. Toponymy is divided into several branches:

Hydronymy (from Greek hydro – water), which studies the names of rivers, lakes, seas, streams, canals, bays, straits, and waterfalls.

Oronymy (from Greek oros – mountain), which studies the names of relief forms such as mountains, peaks, hills, valleys, and plains.

Oikonymy (from Greek oikos – house), polynymy (from Greek polis – city), or urbanonymy (from Latin urbs – city), which deal with the names of villages and cities.

Microtoponymy (from Greek mikros – small), which studies the names of small geographical objects such as springs, wells, fields, meadows, groves, ravines, roads, bridges, and even individual trees possessing proper names.

In addition, toponyms derived from the names of peoples, tribes, or clans are called ethnotoponyms (from Greek ethnos – people). Toponyms formed from personal names are called anthropotoponyms (from Greek anthropos – human).

Other categories include:

Oronyms – proper names of mountains, hills, elevations, peaks, and passes.

Hydronyms – proper names of oceans, rivers, lakes, seas, canals, and streams.

Oikonyms – proper names of cities, villages, and neighborhoods.

Ecclesionyms – names of mosques, churches, monasteries, and similar religious sites.

Dromonyms – proper names of roads, routes, and transportation pathways on land, underground, on water, or under water.

Necronyms – names of cemeteries, burial grounds, and sacred memorial places.

A toponym, or geographical name, is also a word. However, toponyms are proper nouns. Proper nouns emerged relatively late in the development of language and originated from common nouns (appellatives). Some scholars claim that ancient languages lacked proper nouns altogether. In the languages of indigenous peoples of Australia, Africa, and America, proper nouns are relatively rare. In such languages, common nouns or descriptive word combinations often perform the function of proper names.

People living within a familiar, limited territory may refer to places with expressions such as “the place where fish are caught,” “the ravine where floods occur,” “the pasture where sheep perished,” or “the stream with wild boars.” Over time, such descriptive expressions become fixed and stable.

Word combinations and common nouns denoting specific geographical objects gradually become proper names. The emergence of geographical names is therefore the result of the concretization and individualization of general concepts.

Common nouns become toponymized, that is, transformed into toponyms. For example, the word apple generally refers to apple orchards and remains a common noun. However, when it becomes associated with a specific geographical object, it turns into a proper noun.

Similarly, the expression large ravine remains a common noun unless it refers to a particular geographical feature. Thus, toponyms arise and continue to arise from common nouns through the process of concretizing and individualizing geographical concepts.

Toponymization usually occurs when a general concept becomes associated with a particular geographical object. Therefore, the same word or phrase may function either as a common noun or as a toponym depending on the context. For example, wheat field may refer to any field where wheat is grown, whereas Bug‘doyzor Ridge refers to a specific place.

Once geographical names separate from the vocabulary of common nouns, they gradually lose their connection with the original characteristics of the object they denote. In speech, toponyms serve not to emphasize the distinguishing features of an object but rather to identify and differentiate that specific object from others. A word that has become a toponym acquires a new meaning and comes to represent a unique and specific concept.

Geographical names often cease to convey any meaning other than the geographical object itself. For example, when hearing the name Qoraqishloq (“Black Village”), people simply understand it as the name of a settlement. Few stop to wonder whether the village is literally black. An ethnographer familiar with the detailed structure of Uzbek tribes might explain that the name derives from a tribal group called Qora.

Likewise, most people do not question why a village is called Chorshanba (“Wednesday”). What matters more is where the village is located and what kind of settlement it is. Some may vaguely recall that a market used to be held there on Wednesdays.

The process by which a word moves away from its ordinary meaning and becomes associated with a specific geographical object is known as toponymization.

As words become toponyms, they often acquire typical toponymic forms and characteristic suffixes. In Uzbek toponyms, especially settlement names (oikonyms), suffixes such as -iston (Sho‘riston, Bog‘iston), -iya (O‘zbekiya, Mingiya), -kor (Paxtakor, Lalmikor), and -cha (Quduqcha, Buluqcha) are common.

Today, the degree of toponymization varies among geographical names. In some toponyms, the original meaning of the word remains clearly visible; in others, it is only partially preserved; in still others, it is barely noticeable or has disappeared entirely.

For this reason, it is incorrect to alter obscure place names merely to make them more understandable. Such names may represent valuable linguistic and historical monuments preserved from ancient languages.

Many toponyms have undergone significant grammatical and semantic changes before reaching their present form.

According to their origin, toponyms can be divided into two main types:

1. Naturally formed toponyms – names created and transmitted by the people themselves.
2. Artificially formed toponyms – names officially assigned by governmental or administrative decision.

Toponyms are an essential part of human language and culture, serving as unique identifiers that distinguish one geographical object from another. The study of toponyms, known as toponymy, examines the origin, structure, meaning, and development of geographical names, including hydronyms, oronyms, oikonyms, microtoponyms, ethnotoponyms, and anthrotoponyms. These names preserve valuable information about the natural environment, historical events, economic activities, ethnic composition, and cultural traditions of a region.

The formation of toponyms is closely connected with the process of transforming common nouns into proper nouns through concretization and individualization. Over time, many geographical names lose their original lexical meanings and become markers of specific places. Nevertheless, they continue to function as important linguistic and historical records that reflect the worldview and collective memory of the communities that created them.

Because toponyms often contain traces of ancient languages, forgotten customs, and historical realities, they represent an invaluable source for linguistic, historical, ethnographic, and cultural research. Therefore, preserving and studying geographical names is crucial not only for understanding language development but also for safeguarding the cultural heritage and historical identity of a people.

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