

# Toponyms and Cultural Heritage: A peaceful partnership of forced alliance?

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The introduction gives a survey on the definitions of toponyms, its evolutionary development within the last decades and its outreach into the social sciences. Young onomastic conceptions approximately since the 1970ies conceive a wide significance of toponyms as regards the social, cultural and political sphere. In recent years a new field of research in human geography, called 'critical toponymy' focusses on toponyms and their relation to politics.

The next two chapters deal with a critical survey of what is meant by the 'nature' of toponyms as well as by 'critical toponymy' and highlight new scientific conceptions in onomastics and in human geography.

As conclusion a new theoretical framework, based on participatory processes, tries to show, how a 'new thinking of history', a 'turn', could ease an improvement in conflicting situations.

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## INTRODUCTION

Toponyms arise under specific social and sovereign conditions and thus are part of people's social and political life. They stand in the field of tension between the two poles of culture and politics. But, what do we understand by toponyms? The UN defines them as general terms for any place or geographical entity (see UNGEGN Glossary no. 224, 216 and 339). A more or less technical approach, which doesn't encompass the whole semantic scope of toponyms. For us linguists, they are the research objects in the discipline of onomastics (the study of proper names), which is known as a subbranch of linguistics. Younger onomastic conceptions approximately since the 1970ies conceive a far wider significance of toponyms as regards its outreach into the social, cultural and political sphere of mankind. In this respect I cite Klaas Willems<sup>1</sup> and his definition of proper names (the umbrella term for toponyms and anthroponyms), which fits exactly to toponyms: "...*Proper names are complex signs with specific linguistic, pragmatic, logical, philosophical, semiotic, historical, psychological, social, and juridical pro-*

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<sup>1</sup> Willems p. 86.

*erties, and hence represent a vast interdisciplinary field of study....."* In this definition the political aspect is missing or is not clearly addressed, but probably one could subsume it under the 'social' aspect. Toponyms very often are used as a tool for exerting power or showing supremacy, or on the other hand are witnesses of a generous policy as regards e.g. the restoration of minority place names. But true is, that for long times in the past linguists did not regard it as their task to combine 'place names' with political approaches as it is inherent in the concept of 'place' as '*... articulated moments in the networks of social relations and understandings ....*'<sup>2</sup>

A new field of research in human geography, called 'critical toponymy' focusses on toponyms and their relation to politics. It shows the manifold intersections between culture, cultural heritage and politics, be it cases such as name changes, new names, imposed names given by occupiers or the peaceful adoption of already existing names by immigrating settlers with other languages. Here the question arises: what role plays language in regard to power relations. To deal with the two poles culture and politics improves the understanding how culture plays both part in and, in turn, is shaped by social relations based on language, ethnicity, nationality etc. Jani Vuolteenaho and Lawrence D. Berg in their book on critical toponymies take up the issue of '*...place naming as "a political practice par excellence of power over space"...*'<sup>3</sup>

The following considerations want to highlight toponyms in their relation on the one side to culture and on the other side to politics, a situation, which bears in it a potential conflict between cultural heritage and political movement. The two poles shall be investigated from both sides and it shall be demonstrated how deeply they are interconnected and being depending on one another. In a further step considerations shall be demonstrated, how seemingly simple conflicts could be resolved, omitting tools of power in its broadest and most sensible scope in favour of a participatory process. We heard about similar suggestions in the initial paper by Prof. Stolzman, when he proposed the engagement of civil societies, societal participants working on the periphery to solve issues.

## **THE NATURE OF TOPONYMS**

Toponyms own a twofold character: On the one hand they convey accurate location-based informations, and on the other hand, by analyzing their linguistic and historical standing, they shed light on the ecological, social, political and cultural conditions of a society, that is to say, one must take into account the intra- and extralinguistic semantic functions as part of communication.<sup>4</sup>

We all know, that the genesis of toponyms lies in the hands of people with a specific language, their unique culture and specific economic practices, generally speaking in their specific skills, their intellectual practices and their ways of living, and their toponyms are the memory of it. So, the significance of dialectical relations between culture, social relations and space and place is evident. Toponyms – how old they may be – give us

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<sup>2</sup> See also Critical toponymies p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Critical toponymies p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> See also Willems (abstract).

insight into the natural conditions of a space (the physical geography, be it arable or mountainous or cultivated land), the language(s) of the inhabitants or colonizers (be it indigenous languages, minority languages, or in the case of colonization western languages; see the Australian programme of researching the indigenous place names, which were abandoned respectively neglected by colonizers: they reveal us, that the indigenous people had a completely alternative mental set for naming places and spaces).

The *Denali* is the highest mountain in Alaska in the language of the Koyukon Athabaskans means 'the big/tall (mountain)' <sup>5</sup>, its former official name was Mount McKinley (named 1896 in support of the presidential candidate William McKinley), and was the official name between the long period from 1917 to 2015). But the name never was abandoned by the people themselves, they always used the original name. Another case is the *Uluru* as the indigenous name vs. The colonial name *Ayers Rock* (named in honour of the then Chief Secretary of South Australia, Sir Henry Ayers <sup>6</sup>). Similar examples, all with a 'history' behind them can be found all over the world. Toponyms give reference to cultural and historical conditions of human beings, who have their own *modus vivendi*, they shape a specific image in the minds of the inhabitants, create an identity and give a feeling of what is called in German "Heimat" (there is no precise translation of this word into English, an approximating translation could be „homeland feeling“). Toponyms create emotional attachments to places, which are associated with cultural-historical narratives (we heard in former symposia of very old narratives or legends belonging to the name *Donghae/East Sea*). In this sense, place naming is part of a broader history of spatial identification.

Naming a place is always a socially embedded act, and place is frequently embedded in power relations, toponymy controls the "...*intersection of naming, place making and power...*" <sup>7</sup> The perceptions have changed and today's point of view concerning toponyms is to give fairness and justice a chance, and practices to reimburse states and peoples for past injustices gain ground.

This paper concentrates on language and power relations in regard to toponyms. It deals with the socio-historical and socio-cultural significance of toponyms. Though this approach is very connected with the etymology of words, etymology alone is by far not the way to understand the whole semantic field of a toponym, or better to say to give answer to the question: what's in a name? Modern onomastics regards a name, a toponym as a sum of informations about the physical and human fields of study, the study of artifacts and cultural concepts. We as linguists nowadays pursue more than it was the case in former times an interdisciplinary way in the analysis of toponyms (resuming the ideas of the philological movement 'words and things' (in German: *Wörter und Sachen*) of the first half of the 20th century, which wanted to integrate linguistics into the cultural sciences, a countermovement

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<sup>5</sup> See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Denali#Naming> (accessed 10-12-2017).

<sup>6</sup> See the Australian Programme of collecting and recording the indigenous place names, and the dual naming concept. Another example of re-vitalizing indigenous names is the Canadian programme of the Inuit names. See the UNGEGN homepage: <https://unstats.un.org/UNSD/geoinfo/UNGEGN/default.html>

<sup>7</sup> Berg/Vuolteenaho p. 7.

to the Neogrammarians<sup>8</sup> to research the intralinguistic semantic functions of words, in method similar to human geography, where sovereign functions are researched, to get down to the very roots of a name and to give best possible answers on the meaning of a toponym regarding space and time. In this respect it is not far-fetched being able to elaborate fair compromises for conflicting situations which could answer the positions of the involved parties. Again we heard about similar processes in Prof. Stoltman's paper, where he cited resolved cases. This claim to regard the socio-environmental together with the political background might be a very challenging and time-consuming task, but reveals motives, facts and processes of name giving acts and plays a part in contributing to a broad comprehension of the conflict and to make the brain free for non-political solutions. The humanities can draw benefits from the globalization insofar as cultural and political knowledge is widely distributed by internet, the world is becoming a smaller place and the actors in it are well advised to be good players in a global knowledge based society. On the other hand, politics in cases of peaceful interactions as well as in conflicting situations can revert to linguistics and the humanities as a reliable partner who can provide the scientific multi-faceted facts for a fair solution, but unfortunately is not always taken into consideration, when contradictory political aspects are foregrounded. The linguistic and the extralinguistic facts complement or separate each other.

The study of social processes was always part of the linguistic analysis of place names, it was always the tradition of onomastics to achieve the best approach to the meaning of a name. Linguists connect a relationship with regional dialects where words often have another meaning or inhabitants use a completely other nomenclature for naming spaces depending on their modus vivendi in their specific natural surroundings. Nowadays the multidisciplinaryities of toponyms play an increasingly important role. To select 'only' the word / appellative from a toponym without its onomastic embedding into social processes, 'coming to the (linguistic) roots', is not the method how linguistics analyze toponyms today. True is that the political aspect is or was largely neglected. Modern onomastics has for a couple of decades introduced the cultural historical aspect to get down to the fundamentals and to unveil as best as possible the complex structure of a toponym and its meaning. Here lies the interface to cultural geography which aims at a similar goal with the emphasis on the political role of toponyms.

## TOPONYMS AND POLITICS

The relation of power plays a pivotal role in the naming of spaces, for geographers names and naming practices have long been understood as being imbued with meaning and power. Some years ago, the new branch of *critical toponymy* has developed and in the meantime a number of literature around this concept has been published.<sup>9</sup> Critical toponymy recognizes that '*... names are discursive agents of power and resistance that perform active roles in the ongoing production of place ...*'<sup>10</sup>. Toponyms reflect the power relations, how it is proved in Widemann's thesis, in which he analyzed place naming in an urban development.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See also [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/W%C3%B6rter\\_und\\_Sachen](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/W%C3%B6rter_und_Sachen) (accessed 7-12-2017).

<sup>9</sup> Widemann (2015), p. 4, cites Rose-Redwood et al. (2010).

<sup>10</sup> Widemann p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Widemann's thesis, an urban case study in the city of Vancouver, gives a good example, p. 6.

New theories in place naming studies move away from regarding place names as *'transparent signifiers'* to designate a place and shifting to a *'critical interrogation of the politics of place naming'*.<sup>1 2</sup> This is a rather new approach to examine the politics of place-naming practices, a 'new turn' in human geography. Toponyms always bear a political power and *'place naming is a political practice par excellence of power over space'* as Vuolteenaho and Berg state in their book on critical toponymies.<sup>1 3</sup>

In the last years human geography gave the politics of place-naming priority. A good case study is the work on the naming practice in Iraq during the war of 2003, where Iraqi toponyms were replaced by American language inscriptions, using particularly American naming motives. These new studies brought to light, that this method was applied to give more security, but also a remembrance of home to the occupiers.<sup>1 4</sup> I would add, that a not to be underestimated factor lies in the language competence combined with mental perceptions: the ability to remember a specific place, a toponym, grows with one's own language competence and declines by using foreign language toponyms, which lack the power of remembrance and cannot awaken memories or narratives. But this afore mentioned methods at the same time evoke practices of imperialism or better to say are the sample of an imperialistic behaviour which we all thought is past history. Place-naming involved in the semiotics of political regime change is at all times a very controversial matter, some groups have the authority of naming (in this case the occupiers) while others have lost it or are not allowed to exert it (local inhabitants).

Geographers raise the claim, that critical toponymy processes should be supplemented with archival research, interviews with local inhabitants, linguistic and cultural-historical expertise, and participant observation; it should comprise all 'what's in a name', a kind of 'performative turn'<sup>1 5</sup> to gain augmented knowledge and meaning about toponymic space and place. All toponyms have an oral tradition, which is worth to give attention to. The inclusion of oral traditions can avoid mental injuries amid the inhabitants and they at best pave the way to the origins. So, place naming can be seen in the context of conceptions of new history, 'to think history new', an academic tendency represented by the British historiographer Keith Jenkins and his post-modern theory.<sup>1 6</sup> This does not mean to wipe out past occurrences or bad remembrances, but instead to proceed with considerations fit for the future, opening a new wide window for peaceful and respectful partnerships at eye level, and to go on with the projection of national identity onto physical territory, a spatialization of memory and power.

One nature of toponyms lies in their alliance with structures of power.<sup>1 7</sup> The act of name giving is always a manifestation of power, be it in peaceful or usurpatory intention. As soon as a name appears on a map it has a somehow official character and at the same

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<sup>1 2</sup> Rose-Redwood p. 455.

<sup>1 3</sup> Vuolteenaho/Berg, Chapter 1: Towards Critical Toponymies. Introduction, p. 1.

<sup>1 4</sup> Rose-Redwood et al. 453.

<sup>1 5</sup> A term used in cultural sciences which is concerned with the questions: to what degree can human activities show cultural interpretive frames and mirror identities.

<sup>1 6</sup> Jenkins pp. 3-4.

<sup>1 7</sup> Rose-Redwood et al. 457.

time gains a global awareness. Is a name on an officially authorized map, it belongs to the world's common knowledge.<sup>18</sup> Helander in her publication on Sámi place names addresses the 'toponymic silence' as a '... power strategy ... to control and dictate which names in which language can or cannot be used in official contexts ...'.<sup>19</sup> In this context one must also discuss, that some conflicting name cases of this genre find their approval by 'democratic' consent or vote, but at the same time the limits of democracy are infringed by these practices. So, one is tempted to raise the question: which issue is apt for a poll, and if not, should there be other means more suitable to achieve a consensus. Such a status of *silence* is not only visible in map products but also in print publications in official use. The IHO publication 'Limits of Oceans and Seas' (3rd ed. 1953) e.g. can be subsumed under these cases, the democratic votes respectively negotiations were impeded or brought no solution since decades, so that other means should be looked for.

## CONCLUSIONS

Toponyms owe a multi-faceted structure, which entails a rich pool on social and political values – which can even so lead to conflicting situations. Naming conflicts rely on rights-based solutions, by consulting archival material, considering historical facts and the energy of human beings for transference. Widemann (p. 8) proposes '*participatory solutions among disparate opinions of neighbouring states, using a toponymic genealogy approach to excavate an ongoing politics of toponymy*'. In his concept the unsensible use of toponyms is a '*technique of symbolic re-possession to (re)claim place-identities from the powerful*'.<sup>20</sup> In this new approach to regard the full scale of 'what's in a toponym', techniques of symbolic power are also included.

By setting up a schedule for the solution of naming conflicts, value-adding processes based on socio-cultural aspects and supported by historical and archival sources could be initiated with the goal of the creation of a new neighbourhood on participatory basis, which could fulfill the wishes of both parties.

With respect to the previous mentioned facts the sample of *Donghae* and *Nihonkai* could be successfully solved by regarding the name *East Sea* as unpolitical 'brand,' and *Sea of Japan* as historical abiding memory, both names can be arguable. This would be a fair balance, a kind of 'branding policy' between policy making and policy keeping. Narratives which are existing and meantime emerged in both countries and form already part of the people's mental space-bound identity, could be maintained on both sides, a social and spatial justice could be the result of this new approach, thinking history new.

An answer to the initial question expressed in the title of this paper can be: toponyms in all the times and in all their functions show their two sides, their Janus face, which cannot be separated from one another. People are encouraged to permit a new mentality, and let new interpretations and ideas come true.

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<sup>18</sup> Hausner p. 143.

<sup>19</sup> Helander p. 256.

<sup>20</sup> Widemann p. 18.

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