

## Section 10 Toponymic research and documentation

### Chapter 26 Etymology and the historic study of geographical names

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##### 26.1 What is etymology?

Etymology is known as the study of the origins, the „true sense“and meaning of words. Etymologies answer questions about historical relationships of and among languages and in that sense, they address additionally to the linguistic issues the full historical dimension of toponyms. Place names or toponyms (or geographical names [see Glossary no. 224, 216 and 339]) are the general terms for any place or geographical entity and as such are the research objects of onomastics, which is known as a subbranch of linguistics. Geographical names are defined as ‘names applied to a feature on Earth’ and they are closely connected to toponyms, which are defined as ‘comprehensive term for geographical names and extraterrestrial names’ (see Glossary no.216 and 339). In general, a geographical name is the proper name (a specific word, combination of words, or expression) used consistently in language to refer to a particular place, feature or area having a recognizable identity on the surface of the Earth (Manual p. 9). Toponyms are constituent parts of cartography and topography. It needed some centuries foretymology to develop as a scientific discipline from the early attempts of etymologies in Platons dialogue *Kratylos* (see

[www.christianlehmann.eu](http://www.christianlehmann.eu) [Schriftenverzeichnis → Etymologie; accessed 10-01-2016) and by the Greek Stoics until the present day. Etymology in a broad sense can be understood „... as historical research that aims at investigating the origin of a word (lexical etymology) or structure (structural etymology)...“ (Bibliographical note to Mailhammer, ONB Vienna [online catalogue]; see also Mailhammer p. 3f.). And with the focus on place names one can add, that etymology is moreover a scientific method, which opens an interface to the large variety of human actions in time and space, because toponyms own a special position within linguistics and exert manifold functions expressed through their lexical, structural and historical peculiarities.

*„There are two basic etymological configurations. Either a word is native in the sense that it was created at a chronologically earlier stage of a language and handed down from one generation to the next, or it came into a language from another through some form of language contact“* (Mailhammer p. 9).

Modern etymology regards the diachronic as well as the synchronic aspect of etymological analysis. Synchrony and diachrony are two opposing but at the same time complementary perspectives on linguistic phenomena, that makes a distinction between a sheer synchronous or diachronous perspective impossible. Synchrony refers to the static stage of a language (word formation, sound laws etc.), while diachrony is affiliated with the history of words (name history, language changes etc.). Etymologies of toponyms deliver informations on the language, relationship, phonological and semantic structure, the history of words and in regarding all these factors, and transcending the limits of linguistic research, it opens a window to a whole cosmos of human settlement activity (See Bergmann, H. et al. [2009]). The socio-cultural aspect

cannot be left out of consideration and it is commonly agreed, that toponyms belong to the immaterial cultural heritage of mankind. Other than with common nouns the toponyms (like all names) own a third dimension, that is the identifying quality and vice versa the named features enable us to take a look at the times when the places were named, they give us insight into the original intentions why this name was given, under which socio-cultural conditions a social community coined this place name.

Linguistic science came into being in Europe and so Europe has a long tradition in etymological research. Most of the significant etymologists were and are native speakers of Indo-European languages. The 19<sup>th</sup> century brought a rich increase of linguistic knowledge which inspired the etymological approach to words and nouns and by the end of that century etymological dictionaries for most of the Indo-European language families were published. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially in the decades after the Second World War the methods and theories of modern etymology were developed, which opened a new era to the discipline of etymology. Including the social factor and merging it with the linguistic details opened a new dimension for the understanding of the nature of names.

Geographical names have and had in all the times a broad cultural significance. When we speak of toponyms and especially of toponyms in cartography, their overall significance lies in their multiple functions (address function, identification, language, social, economic and cultural relevance, the whole system of the mental comprehension of natural and cultural environment of peoples) which form the multi-faceted cultural contexts around the name-giving act of toponyms. Names are in the present and were in the past coined by a social community with a specific cultural background or

worldview. A farming society, for example, coins names that differ from those of an industrial community; the natural environment is reproduced in the adjacent toponyms (Mont Blanc ‘white mountain’), other geographical features as, for instance, seas bear names from the worldview of the Greek mythology (Atlantic Ocean ‘Sea of Atlas’).

## 26.2 Etymology as the basis for elaborating a standard form of geographical names

Onomastics as a subbranch of linguistics is the study of the origin, history and use of proper names. Toponymy is one of the most important branches of onomastics and is understood as the study of place names. Factors such as the meaning of the elements out of which the toponyms were created, encompassing the topography, geology and ecology of the places bearing the names, the general and local history and the surrounding natural features are integral components that shape and mirror the history and culture of a region, of a state.

**26.2.1** The etymological approach to analyze toponyms, to compile an etymology, comprises linguistic and extralinguistic factors. One must be aware that the extralinguistic factors outweigh the linguistic ones. The standardization of existing and the coining of new geographical names are highly dependent on political factors, such as official language(s), the authorization of traditional or past colonial name forms etc., be it a traditional spelling or naming, or the authorization of a particular language, of minority languages (additionally or stand-alone) or a special dialect. In the case of abandoned toponyms, e.g. for historical sites or excavations, for religious places etc. one is well advised to research the

history around that particular toponym and on this basis reconstruct an orthographically and phonologically correct standard form, which can undergo the official act of standardization by the authorities. Specialist knowledge is required to analyze the origins and meaning of toponyms, tracing their linguistic and extralinguistic history back in order to determine which language and which social group they are from.

The etymological research concentrates on the following linguistic (I) and extralinguistic (II) factors:

### 26.2.1.1 Linguistic factors and methods in etymological research

I: language, historical records, word formation, phonetics, vowel and consonant alternations, meaning, semantics, naming motives, dialect pronunciation and, not less important, the folk etymology if there exists one.

The first step in the etymological processing of toponyms consists of the language survey: what is or are the present language(s) of a state, what former languages were in use and what is or are the authorized language/s. The next task is to consult the archival sources as well as old maps to set up a data set of historical records for a specific toponym from its first recorded entry until the present, whereby the first historical record is given particular attention as regards the spelling and language stage.

Source critics concerning the time horizon at which a text or a map was produced, and concerning the commissioners in whose service the authors (especially for maps) stood, complete the diachronic process. If an author is from outside and not familiar with the regional language(s), orthographic specifics from other languages can influence the spelling. Archival sources provide us the earliest written forms of a toponym and the etymologist

must have a good knowledge of the historic, palaeographic and linguistic peculiarities to handle this challenging task. A discontinuity and an interruption in the sequence of the historical records or the occurrence of a completely new name are indications of extralinguistic processes, be they a population shift, the peaceful immigration of other populations, the takeover of the reign by colonial powers or the devastation of home grounds resulting from natural disasters or wars; a potential later resettlement can create completely new names based on new motives.

Toponyms very often preserve old spellings, dialectal forms and an antiquated vocabulary. Applied rules of sound changes from the first recording until the present lead to the current spelling of the researched toponym. The Austrian city *Innsbruck* e.g. shows in its generic element *-bruck* the old Bavarian dialect form which was standardized instead of the standard language German *-brücke* (‘bridge over the river Inn’). It proves, that geographical names must not be subjected to the same orthographical and grammatical rules as common words. They very often preserve antiquated spellings. One must also regard that the meaning of the word referred to by the name can have undergone a semantic change in the course of the centuries. In present times frequently occurring toponyms may be equipped with distinctive adjuncts for an unambiguous localization (see the example below).



The dialectal pronunciation explored in the course of the field collection of the toponyms can support the plausibility of the etymology or may give suggestions for a completely different origin of a place name. Moreover, fieldwork reveals which names are in use – written or orally - and if there are namevariants besides the official ones. Local informers should be carefully selected in regard to a longtime established dwelling place in that region, because only they know the correct local pronunciation, potential names variants and myth and legend associated with these names.

In the case of a contact etymology, that is when peoples from other countries with other languages immigrate to a country, the two languages can merge or one language may prevail over the other. The substitution rules from one language to the other, that is from the source language to the target language, are applied, vowel and consonant substitutions can be evidence of the period when the immigration took place. An example of these processes is the Austrian place- and river name *Pielach*, originally of Slavonic origin to Slav. \**běla* 'white' (reference to the quality of the water). This name indicates two linguistic processes relevant for the transfer of data from Slavonic to German: (1) the initial Slavonic *b-* came into German (= the South Bavarian dialect as part of the German language) as *b-*, which was only possible up to the eighth century according to the substitution rules (from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century it would have been substituted as *v-/f-* as it can be seen in the Lower Austrian hydronym *Fladnitz* attributed to the same Slavonic stem *běla*). In the following it underwent the High German Consonant Shift *b- > p-* in the second half of the eighth century and after that the German sound changes. (2) The Slavonic etymon \**běl-* no longer took part in the Slavonic liquid metathesis *> blē-* of the ninth

century. These sound processes allow conclusions for the time horizon, when Slavonic settlement in that specific region of Austria ceased and was gradually replaced by Bavarian colonization.

The naming motives on the other hand are more or less found in the extralinguistic sphere and are better explained below (under item 32.2.1.2). Frequently one is confronted with a folk etymology. It is the name of the process of making obscure or opaque toponyms transparent by phonetic adaptation or by sound assimilation by the local population, giving the name a new meaning, which has nothing to do with the original name, but relies only on phonetic similarities or a reinterpretation of the genuine name. The difference between etymology and folk etymology lies in the transformation of an unknown word by analogy or assimilation and a name, which has been modified in such a way cannot be traced back to its original stem by linguistic recursion (see the example of *Mailand* below) These modified names lose their synchronous and diachronous quality as authentic cultural-historical testimony.

We all treasure the identification function of toponyms, and this might be the background for their retention of very conservative forms in spelling, grammar and often also in vocabulary that are no longer understood by the local residents. This quality makes them favourite objects for a popular explanation, generally known as folk etymology (e.g. the German exonym *Mailand*: Latin *Mediolanum* > Middle-High-German. *Milan* > New-High-German *Mailand*, where the old Latin – element – *[p]lanum* 'plain' (*Medio-[p]lanum* 'situated in the middle of the plain [of the river *Po*]) was not understood and was substituted by the -German generic element *-land* 'land', which made the generic element understandable for a

German speaking community). This new generic element connotes a secondary motivation, which was created by assimilation to the German lexicon and is far away from the original meaning of that name.

### 26.2.1.2 Extralinguistic factors in etymological research

The extralinguistic aspects comprise topography, geology, ecology, and the local as well as the general history of a country. They play a prominent role in the analysis of the toponyms and give important contributions to the culture of a specific region. „Going back to the roots“ means also to ascertain the naming motive of a particular toponym. The naming motives belong to the extralinguistic sphere of toponyms and are manifold. They reveal in most cases a further quality of toponyms, namely the culture-specific testimony of the economic, ecological and natural preconditions in the earliest times of human habitation. The etymologist is well advised to contact experts from various disciplines, to find the meaning of handicraft or farming terms, or technical terms from mining or geology, biology and botany, navigation or religion. Sometimes toponyms may also refer to regional myths and legends.

## 26.3 Place names and their manifold etymological histories

A **transparent etymology** exists, when the linguistic element or elements composing the toponym, be it a simplex or a composite toponym, can clearly be understood. An example for such a case is e.g. the toponym *Amsterdam* 'dam in the river Amstel'.



The **native / continuous etymology** is the case, when the toponym shows a continuous recording (regarding the

regular vowel and consonant changes in the spellings in the single language periods) through the centuries: for example, *Paris* derives its name from the Celtic ethnic group of the *Parisii*, living on the banks of the river *Seine* with their capital city *Lutetia* (affiliated to the Indo-European stem *\*lut-* ‘mud, swamp’), in Roman times called *Lutetia Parisiorum*, which resulted in the present name *Paris*, omitting the first component. *München*, the capital city of Bavaria/Germany derives its name from the - Old-High-German word *munih* ‘monk’ (< Latin *monacus*), the first record dates from 1158 *apud Munichen* > *München* (*u* > *ü* by metaphony).



### 26.3.1 Name change as a result of migration, immigration or population shift:

Many places in Europe look back at a long history. The Roman Empire left behind numerous place names, but not all of them found a continuation after the decline of the Roman Empire which happened about the 5<sup>th</sup> century. One of the examples with a broken historical names tradition is the capital of Austria, *Vienna*.

The Roman name was *Vindobona*, a compound with the generic element *-bona* ‘estate’ and the Celto-Roman personal name *Vindos*; it became extinct after the withdrawal of the Romans and only in the 9<sup>th</sup> century the new name recorded in a historical source from 881 (copy 12<sup>th</sup> century) *ad Wēniam* > *Wien* of Germanic origin came up; it was given after the name of the river *Wien* (Old-High-German *witu* ‘wood, timber’), which has its source in

the Vienna Woods and flows through the city. The name was probably transferred as the name for the city by the Langobards, who settled for a short time in that region.



Another example is the Croatian city now named *Dubrovnik*, which had originally in the 7<sup>th</sup> century the name *Ragusa*, when the inhabitants of *Cavtat* fled to the nearby coastal rock where now Dubrovnik is situated. It is uncertain where the name *Ragusa* came from, it is presumably a pre-Roman name, probably even belonging to a so-called Illyrian stratum; in Roman times, it was recorded in the historical sources as *Ragusium* (Schramm p. 75 and p. 331 ff.). Due to historical testimonies from the 12<sup>th</sup> century the inhabitants assimilated with the - Slavs residing nearby and the city obtained the new name *Dubrovnik*, derived from Slavonic *\*dǫ bъ* ‘oak’. The naming motive was its position below the mountain *Srđ*, which was in the past forested with oak trees.

Large regions or long rivers can have **sectional names**, like the river *Brahmaputra*, which flows through China, India and Bangladesh and is consecutively named *Tsangpo* (‘river flowing through the western Tibetan province Tsang’), *Brahmaputra* (‘son of Brahma’), *Jamuna* (vague etymology, perhaps *Yamuna*, the daughter of the sun god Surya in Hindu mythology) and *Meghna*, all with different etymologies. On the other hand, Europe’s second-longest river the *Danube*, flows through ten countries and has nowadays only one name, derived from the Roman name *Danuvius* and adapted to the modern languages of the

individual countries. But in the past it had two different names for different sections of the river: *Ister* (for the lower course) Indo-European stem *\*oṛis-/\*is-* ‘fast flowing’) and *Danube* (Indo-European *\*dah₂-* ‘flowing’). The extinct name *Ister* referred to the gorge at the Iron Gate on the border between Serbia and Romania, whereas the name in the upper and middle course reflects its rather moderate flow character.

### 26.3.2 Name changes as a result of political changes:

Wars always change the world map and old names disappear while new names arise. The change of the geographical landscape, visible in the substitution of previous traditional names by new toponyms, is often the result of a newly established state or of a new political regime. Toponyms in their function as identity markers are a medium to strengthen the power of the new government. For example, the German city *Chemnitz* derives its name from the Slavonic name of the small river which flows through the city (‘river rich of stones’) and thus communicates knowledge about the geology of that region. During the existence of the German Democratic Republic ([GDR] with a communist government) from 1953 to 1990 the old name was replaced by *Karl-Marx-Stadt* (Karl Marx, the founder of communism was born in Chemnitz). After the demise of the GDR the population voted for a return of the old name.



Apparently **arbitrary name changes** can also result from politically motivated reasons: the capital of Kazakhstan

*Astana* (meaning 'capital city'), was founded as *Akmolinsk* (1830-1961), from 1961 to 1991 it was named Zelinograd (meaning in Russian: 'new land city'), between 1992 and 1998 it was known as *Aqmoly* (1992–1998, meaning 'white grave'; Wikipedia accessed 2015-10-01), in 1992 it was renamed as *Aqmola*, and finally in 1998 it received its present official new name *Astana*.

**Coining a new name** can take place, when in the course of political realignments new states arise or when new settlement areas are created. The capital of Pakistan *Islamabad* (Urdu اسلام آباد 'residence of Islam'; Wikipedia accessed 2015-10-01) was founded in the 1960s; this new composite name refers in its specific element to the religion 'Islam' while its generic element *-ābād* means 'inhabited place; city, town'. This type of name fits into the culture-specific scheme of place names in the subcontinent, like e.g. *Hyderabad*.

Another example is the new capital of Myanmar, when in 2006 the government decided to found a new capital city with the name *Naypyitaw* (generally translated as 'royal capital'; Wikipedia accessed 2015-10-01). Its official name was announced on 27 March 2006, spelled *Nay Pyi Taw* (sometimes also as *Naypyidaw*). Failing an official Romanization system in Myanmar there are **Variante spellings of names** in use, e.g. *Bagan* (variant *Pagan*), *Irrawaddy* (river), *Ayeyawady* and *Ayeyarwady* (region), *Yangon* (variant *Rangoon*).

**Former colonial names and the reinstatement of indigenous names:** The generally accepted political tendency nowadays is to establish a programme for the revitalization of the old names, to collect, etymologize and officialize them (see Australia, Canada). One can remark, that the global usage of the reinstated names gains credence. *Mount Everest* (named after a British surveyor of India) is a good example: its Tibetan Pinyin name is *Qomolangma* ('Holy Mother' in Tibetan [Wikipedia

'*Mount Everest*' accessed 3-11-2015) and this spelling was standardized by the Chinese authorities, romanized as *Chomolungma, Qomolangma Feng*.



*Mount Everest's north face from the Tibetan plateau (Wikipedia, accessed 3/10/2015)*

The same took place very recently, when in 2015 *Mount McKinley* (named after an American presidential candidate), the highest mountain in North America, was renamed officially with its old local name *Denali* (meaning 'high, tall' in the local Koyukon Athabaskan Indian language), which has always been used for centuries by the indigenous people in Alaska.

Another good example for the reinstatement of an old name is mount *Uluru* in Australia. Located in South Australia, which allows double naming, the feature is now officially referred to as *Uluru / Ayers Rock*.

**Colonial names** are a special chapter in the historic study of place names. They can be found all over the globe, and were introduced by the Colonial powers; they replaced the local place names or are new names. The histories of colonized regions are mostly well documented and so the naming motives are well known. The striking characteristics of colonial place names are that they

contain names of persons, which are associated with the colonial histories or that the colonizers named their new territories or settlements after a place in their home country. Tracing back the etymologies of the colonial place names, one learns that in the early stages of colonialism the names were not stable, underwent many changes, dependent on the alternate occupiers, for example: Nieuw Amsterdam (1625-1664) – New York (1664-1673) – Nieuw Oranje (1673-1674) – New York (1664-).

Namibia, formerly known as German South-West Africa, then South West Africa, a German colony between 1884 and 1919 holds a number of toponyms of Germanic origins: *Lüderitz* (since 2013! *Nami-Nüs* [with click consonants] in the Khoisan language), founded in 1884, was named after the tobacconist *Franz Adolf Eduard Lüderitz* from Bremen, one of the founders of this first German colony in Africa. Another city in this territory with a German name is *Schuckmannsburg* (founded 1909), named after Bruno von Schuckmann, the imperial governor of the colony in the years 1907 until 1910. With the administrative reform in 2013 it was renamed *Luhonono*.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo, formerly known as Belgian Congo, then Zaïre (1971-1997) is another example for a broad inventory of colonial names. In this region, we are sometimes confronted with names coined on a French language background: e.g. *Léopoldville* (in 1966 renamed *Kinshasa*), named in honour of King Leopold II of Belgium; *Élisabethville* (Belgian Dutch *Elisabethstad*, named after Queen Elisabeth, wife of King Albert I of Belgium) → from 1960 on *Lumumbashi*; *Stanleyville* (Belgian Dutch *Stanleystad*, named after the Welsh explorer Sir Henry Morton Stanley) → *Kisangani*.



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