

LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF TOPONYMS

Navruzova Nigina Khamidovna

*(Teacher of English Linguistics Department, Bukhara
State University)*

Gulboeva Nozigul

(2 year Student of BSU)

The word "toponymy" is derived from the Greek words *tópos* "place" and *ónoma* "name". Toponymy is itself a branch of onomastics, the study of names of all kinds.

Toponym is the general name for any place or geographical entity. Related more specific types of toponym include hydronym for a body of water and oronym for a mountain or hill. A toponymist is one who studies toponymy. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word "toponymy" first appeared in English in 1876; since then, toponym has come to replace "place- name" in professional discourse among geographers. It can be argued that the first toponymists were the storytellers and poets who explained the origin of specific place names as part of their tales; sometimes place-names served as the basis for the etiological legends. The process of folk etymology usually took over, whereby a false meaning was extracted from a name based on its structure or sounds. Thus, the toponym of Hellespont was explained by Greek poets as being named after Helle, daughter of Athamas, who drowned there as she crossed it with her brother Phrixus on a flying golden ram. The name, however, is probably derived from an older language, such as Pelasgian, which was unknown to those who explained its origin. George R Stewart theorized, in his book *Names on the Globe*, that Hellespont originally meant something like "narrow Pontus" or "entrance to Pontus", "Pontus" being an ancient name for the region around the Black Sea, and by extension, for the sea itself.

Place names provide the most useful geographical reference system in the world. Consistency and accuracy are essential in referring to a place to prevent confusion in everyday business and recreation.

The study of place-name transfer from one language to another is undertaken by investigating oral and written methods of place-name communication. Phonetic transfer is the most common means of place-name transfer between languages. A toponymist, through well-established local principles and procedures developed in cooperation and consultation with the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names. Toponymy, taxonomic study of place-names, based on



etymological, historical, and geographical information. A place-name is a word or words used to indicate, denote, or identify a geographic locality such as a town, river, or mountain. Toponymy divides place-names into two broad categories: habitation names and feature names. A habitation name denotes a locality that is peopled or inhabited, such as a homestead, village, or town, and usually dates from the locality's inception. Feature names refer to natural or physical features of the landscape and are subdivided into hydronyms (water features), oronyms (relief features), and places of natural vegetation growth (meadows, glades, groves).

Toponymy is concerned with the linguistic evolution (etymology) of place-names and the motive behind the naming of the place (historical and geographical aspects). Most toponymy, however, has concentrated on the etymological study of habitation names, often neglecting the study of feature names and the motive behind the naming of the place.

Habitation and feature names are either generic or specific, or a combination of the two. A generic name refers to a class of names such as river, mountain, or town. A specific name serves to restrict or modify the meaning of the place-name. Most of the world's languages can be divided into two groups based on the general tendency to have the specific either precede or follow the generic. In English the specific usually comes first, while in French the specific generally follows the generic. The influence of other languages creates exceptions to this generalization. The influence of French and Spanish created many exceptions to the tendency in English in the United States to have the specific first. This is most evident in the naming of many larger bodies of water, such as Lake Superior, Lake Michigan, or Lake Charaplain, that were first explored and settled by the French. English settlers migrating into these areas accepted the French naming convention, but since the French did not colonize the areas heavily, many of the smaller bodies of water in these regions were named under the English convention of specific first.

Most toponymic studies have concentrated on the specific aspect of the place-name. The adjectival form of the specific is the dominant place-name type in English. Prepositional place-names used in a descriptive sense are more rare in English. The City of Chicago is an example of the prepositional place-name, but in common use the preposition and the generic are dropped. Toponymy also involves the study of place-names within and between languages. Studies within a language usually follow three basic assumptions: every place-name has a meaning, including place-names derived from personal names, place-names describe the site and record some evidence of human occupation or ownership:



once a place-name is established or recorded, its phonetic development will parallel the language's development.

The study of place-name transfer from one language to another is undertaken by investigating oral and written methods of place-name communication. Phonetic transfer is the most common means of place-name transfer between languages. This involves the spoken transfer of a place-name from one language to another. Little or no knowledge of the language from which the place-name originated is required. A person will listen to the place-name spoken and then phonetically render the place-name in his or her own language, creating at best a close approximation. Many of the early North American colonial place-names were transferred from native Indian languages in this manner. Oral translation requires at least some degree of bilingualism on the part of both parties communicating the place-name. Translations of place-names have usually occurred with more important place-names or with large features. Many of the names of the seas of the world, for example, have been translated from different languages. Folk etymology is based on the sound of the place-name and is therefore similar to phonetic transfer. Folk etymology occurs when the sounds of one language will not easily convert to the sounds of the second language, as in phonetic transfer. The transfer of many place-names occurred between French and English settlers of North America through folk etymology.

The dominance of etymology in toponymy has limited the interest in writing as a means of place-name transfer. As printing became more important over the years, place-names were adopted between countries and languages directly from maps by visual transfer. Once the name had been adopted by visual transfer, it was pronounced according to the adopting language's standards.

Toponymy can uncover important historical information about a place, such as the period of time the original language of the inhabitants lasted, settlement history, and population dispersal. Place-name study can also provide insight to religious changes in an area, such as the conversion to Christianity. Information about the folklore, institutional conditions, and social conditions of a place can be understood as well. Linguistic information like words and personal names not mentioned in literature, can also be found through toponymy.

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