Onomastics as an Interdisciplinary Study

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Onomastics, although an autonomous discipline, overlaps the subject matter of many other disciplines since name use is central to human activity. In its subfield of terminologies or nomenclatures; moreover, onomastics relates to every discipline, subject field, and activity that human beings pursue. We are a species that categorizes and labels. To illustrate this point, we consider briefly the interconnections of onomastics with a number of other disciplines and then look more particularly at the role of placename study as a cross-disciplinary activity.

Names, Poetry, and Making

> The mass of men are very unpoetic, yet that Adam that names things is always a poet. Thoreau, *Journal*, 1853.

poet [ME., fr. MF *poete*, fr. L *poeta*, fr. Gk *poiētēs* maker, poet, fr. *poiein* to make] —*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*.

To name something, as far as human attention goes, is to make it. The unnamed is the unnoticed, and the unnoticed is for cognitive and communicative purposes nonexistent. Giving names is therefore an act of poetry, which, etymologically, is an act of making the object named. Proper names are prominent in some of the less human-oriented sciences, such as astronomy, in which the naming of celestial features is an ancillary part. But the disciplines most concerned with human beings and their activities are the most relevant to onomastics. The following list exemplifies how some of those disciplines are connected —trivially or seriously—with the study of names.

Anthropology: The naming patterns for persons vary considerably from one culture to the next. Although most human societies, being

patrilineal, pass on patronymic surnames through the male line, matrilineal cultures exist, and metronymic surnames are not unknown even in European culture. For example, they are said to be "far from uncommon" among Ashkenazic Jews (Hanks and Hodges 1988, xviii-xix).

Business: A successful commercial name must be memorable, distinctive, and positive in association, qualifications that vary from culture to culture. Chevrolet's *Nova* model had a name that worked well in Anglophone communities, suggesting what is new and stellar; but in Hispanophone communities, the name instead suggested *no va* 'it doesn't go'. A monolingual and monocultural example is Ford's Edsel, a model of car manufactured from 1957 to 1959, which failed partly because of its name. The poet Marianne Moore, who had been retained by Ford to help them name the new model, described her efforts in an amusing article in the *New Yorker* magazine (1957); her imaginative proposals were rejected by the company in favor of the name of a scion of the Ford family.

Cartography: Mapmakers occasionally create or modify names. According to George Stewart (1970, 331) an authentic example of a mistake name from cartography is *Nome,* Alaska. The story is that on a draft survey map, a cape in Alaska was labeled "? name." In subsequent drafts, the label was misunderstood as the name of the cape, and the writing being unclear, the "a" in the original label was mistaken for an "o," resulting in "Cape Nome."

Folklore: Naming and secret names are a theme in folklore. A prominent example is *Rumpelstiltskin,* the name of the dwarf who spins flax into gold for the wife of a prince, on the condition that she either give him her first-born child or guess his name; when she does the latter, he destroys himself in a fit of frustration. His name endures as a type of the mysterious monicker.

Genealogy: Personal names, both surnames and given names, obviously play a major role in genealogical research. They are also linked to the allied field of heraldry, by the occasional use of visual puns in coats of arms and crests, such as the image of a tree by a family named *Oakes* or of a bird by one named *Partridge*.

History: Names have histories, and history is often revealed by names. Geoffrey Chaucer's father was a vintner by occupation, but

somewhere in the not distant family history, one of his ancestors must have been a shoemaker, for the name *Chaucer* is related to the French verb *chausser* 'to shoe'. The history of the English placename *York* mirrors that of the city it names. Earlier doubtless a Celtic settlement, the location became a Roman fortress named *Eboracum,* and passed through Anglo-Saxon (*Eoforwic*), Scandinavian (*Jorvik*), and Anglo-Norman (*Everwik*, *Yerk*) hands on its way to its present identity.

Lexicography: A major theoretical dispute in lexicography is whether a dictionary should list only common nouns, leaving proper names to the encyclopedia. Because dictionary users often look for proper names, however, some contemporary user-friendly (or marketing-conscious) dictionaries enter them in their main body; others list but segregate them in appendices of personal names and placenames.

Linguistics: If lexicography has found a principled basis for excluding proper names from its purview, linguistics has often done so in an unprincipled way, simply by ignoring the data. Yet proper names are a part of language, and a very important part, which require attention. (Algeo 1973 surveys efforts of various kinds to define the linguistic class of proper names.) Proper names are also a significant source of other words in the vocabulary by the derivational process of commonization, such as *zipper* from a trademark.

Literature: The use of literary names has often been studied in the American Name Society. It is notable that such literary names have sometimes entered the general vocabulary. An example is the title character in Sinclair Lewis's novel *Babbitt* (1922), whose surname has become a common noun for "a business or professional man who conforms unthinkingly to prevailing middle-class standards" (as *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate* defines it). The character's name is redolent of *babble*, *rabbit*, and perhaps *babbitt metal* (an alloy whose name came into use in 1900, derived from that of its inventor, Isaac Babbitt).

Orthography and orthoepy: The spelling and pronunciation of proper names is less constrained by the general rules of orthography than other words in the lexicon. The personal name *Cholmondeley,* pronounced "chumley," is a cliché example. The placename *Worcester* is "wooster" in England and Massachusetts, but the Ohio homophonous city name was respelled *Wooster* to avoid the orthographic anomaly. A subtler example

is *Birmingham,* which has as its last syllable "um" in England, but "ham" in Alabama.

Philosophy: The identification of proper names is an important issue for logic. Gottlob Frege, John Stuart Mill, Willard Quine, Bertrand Russell, Gilbert Ryle, and P.F. Strawson are some of the philosophers who have considered the question from a variety of approaches. Confucius, known among the Chinese as the First Teacher, taught that getting names right is the most important thing to do in life: "If names are not correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things. If language is not in accordance with the truth of things, nothing can be carried out successfully" (Analects 13.3).

Politics: Placenames are often politically inspired, as with the change of *Burma* to *Myanmar;* of *Madras* to *Chennai;* of *Bombay* to *Mumbai;* of *Saint Petersburg* to *Petrograd* to *Leningrad* and back to *Saint Petersburg*, as the politics of Russia has shifted. An American example of political fluctuation in names is that of *Cape Canaveral*, Florida, which was changed to *Cape Kennedy* in 1963 to commemorate the assassinated president; locals, however, so objected to the imposed change of a name going back to the Spanish colonization that the original name was restored ten years later, with the *John F. Kennedy Space Center* at the cape serving the memorial function.

Psychology: That names have psychological implications is well-known. A literary example is Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy,* who received his given name through a failure of a maid and a curate to understand his father's conviction that the only name that could benefit the infant was the Hermetically auspicious *Trismegistus.* Tristram's subsequent career was a consequence of his disastrous name. Real examples are also abundant. *Bob* Hope is a better name for a comedian than *Leslie Townes* Hope, and *Judy Garland* for a screen star than *Frances Gumm.* It is not unusual for ordinary individuals to change their names or the spelling of their names because of psychological associations.

Religion: The names of God or of gods provide a sometimes rancorous issue within and between religions. Philosophical Taoism maintains that "the name that can be named is not the Absolute Name." Traditional Judaism has a taboo on pronouncing the name of God, substituting for the tetragrammaton or proper name of God, *YHVH,* the

epithet *Adonai* 'my lord', and even in English disemvoweling the noun as G*d. Philosophical Hinduism holds that all divine names *(Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, Durga, Ishvara*, etc.) are equivalent to one another, being merely different *namarupas* 'names and forms' for the unnamed and formless. Christianity places great importance on the Name, hallowing it in the Lord's Prayer and declaring in Acts (4.12): "neither is there any other name under heaven...wherein we must be saved."

Sociology: Fashions in personal given names reflect the changing customs and values of society. Thomas Pyles (1959) opined that the unconventional personal given names found in the South (*Botavia, Euzema, Jimtom, LaVoid, Phalla*, and *Zazzelle*, for example) are due to the lack of a restraining hand by a minister of the Gospel at the baptismal naming of infants. Less exotic given names also have their changes of fashion, however. The five most popular given names for males and females in America in 1900 were *John, William, Charles, Robert, Joseph; Mary, Ruth, Helen, Margaret, Elizabeth*. By 1975 they had changed to *Michael, Jason, Matthew, Brian, Christopher; Jennifer, Amy, Sarah, Michelle, Kimberly*, the significant shift in fashion occurring after 1950 (Dunkling 1977, 121, 126).

Place, Perception, and Memory

> I have fallen in love with American names,
> The sharp names that never get fat,
> The snakeskin titles of mining claims,
> The plumed war bonnet of Medicine Hat,
> Tucson and Deadwood and Lost Mule Flat.
> —Stephen Vincent Benét, "American Names" (1927), st. 1

Melding the spatial, the historic, and the symbolic is irresistible for students of onomastics, and cultural geographers are prominent among the students of diverse disciplines attracted to the study of placenames. Geographers have laid claim to their share of toponymic study in part because toponyms are words attached to space and place—central organizing concepts for the discipline of geography. The intoxicating toponymic herb, Wilbur Zelinsky's (1967) "catnip to the geographic imagination," stimulates the exploration both of connections between distant realms and of the situated interworkings of landscape, perception, and memory that contribute to richly textured senses of place.

Placenames provide investigators of settlement history a cultural marker, like folk housing, that persists in the landscape and offers clues to spatial patterns of migration and cultural diffusion. Names bestowed by an immigrant group are linguistic spoor that may be read for evidence of an ethnic group's presence and for details of the settlement process, such as enclave formation, assimilation, or prior occupance by other culture groups (Kaups 1966). Culture regions may be delineated through mapping the generic terms favored by different groups for key physical and cultural features, such as streams and settlements (Bastian 1977; Zelinsky 1962).

The rapidity with which North America was colonized by Europeans and the concomitant selection of a multitude of names in a short time span makes the continent a suitable laboratory for the investigation of principles underlying naming. Studies of naming habits in the United States reveal a gross repetition of placenames that bespeaks not so much a lack of imagination among civic leaders as a dedication to the ideal of nation building accompanied by a healthy dose of mythologizing about national character. As Americans moved westward following independence, colonial New England towns provided the single largest stock of transplanted placenames (Leighly 1978). This collective nod to the cultural heartland of the young country was the manifest declaration of belonging by people on a loosely connected and expanding frontier. The roughly concurrent diffusion of names of classical Greek and Roman origin, a trend emanating from a culture hearth in central New York, reinforced the centrality of the greater New England area to national identity (Zelinsky 1967). The selection of classical placenames at once marked the bestowers as an educated and cultured people and legitimized the process of American nation building by grounding the character of American society in the civic and philosophical accomplishments of these earlier great civilizations.

Naming is a social act. The transfer of placenames from an ethnic homeland or the Atlantic seaboard to newly occupied territory is both a commemoration and an act of appropriation. It inscribes into public memory a strongly felt connection to a distant place while proclaiming a degree of belonging or ownership that confers the right to name. Yet rarely do colonizers and settlers encounter a barren linguistic landscape, and placename formation is fraught with borrowings and adaptations of names used by prior inhabitants. The toponymic record is often a

palimpsest, the collective memory of a place's succession of occupants. Fellows-Jensen (1990) demonstrates the complexity of placename history through the derivation of *Manchester*, England, a name reflecting Celtic, Roman, Anglo-Saxon, Viking, and Norman influence. Placenames are a richly textured body for inquiry into cultural exchanges and culture clashes.

If the toponymic landscape serves as the collective memory of multiple culture groups, it is a memory hampered by imperfect and limited recall. Mangled diction, translation, misspelling, and replacement or addition of generics are a few of the ways that placenames are modified to fit the linguistic framework of a newly arrived culture group. In the process of rendering the unfamiliar less so, newcomers blur the meaning and origin of names. With the passing of time, this obfuscation of names creates the conditions for the melding of memory and perception through the agency of imagination. Folk etymologies explain placenames in familiar terms, rationalizing unfamiliar names or forgotten events and persons (Rich 1981). The explanations produced, sometimes plausible, sometimes wildly improbable, are re-creations of a linguistic landscape in the modern vernacular, a creation of meaning to fill a void in understanding. Thus placenames form a record of what is forgotten as well as what is remembered. If an earlier generation of geographers was concerned with differentiating the "modern, apparent meaning" from the "original and genuine one" (Lind 1962, 118), postmodern sensibilities honor the validity of each within their respective historic contexts. The construction of meaning through reinterpretation might be considered part of the "continual becoming of place" (Pred 1984, 292).

The power of designation wielded by toponyms is a self-endowed license to remake the linguistic landscape in one's own image. The victor not only writes the history, but also draws the maps that serve as the repository of names. The hegemonic impulse has been exercised by one culture group or social class on another or as a bureaucratic privilege. Consider what a plethora of Native American placenames has vanished from the multitude that once blanketed North America, never recorded, now recalled by no living person. Mere seasonal invaders, nineteenth-century tourists in New Hampshire's White Mountains sought to replace local names deemed rough and graceless with more pleasing ones (Wright 1929). When Mount Desert Island achieved national park

status, the U.S. Board on Geographic Names substituted appropriately elegant names for "the homelier designations bestowed by the pioneers" (Wright 1929, 142). In each case, names of the more powerful and privileged won out at the expense of the preexisting toponymy.

At times, however, power relations are tested and cultural hegemony contested through the stubborn persistence of vernacular names or in movements to remove hegemonic appellations from use. Thus, a crossroads community in the highlands of North Carolina appears on official maps as *Revere*, an amendment born of a purifying impulse during the early twentieth century, but the place is known as and referred to locally by the older name of *Sodom*. Efforts to replace toponymic specifics considered ethnic or gender slurs, such as *squaw*, *darkey*, and *whore*, reflect a restructuring of power relations within a society increasingly acknowledged as multicultural. Such disputes over what comprises proper and acceptable names mirror cultural changes within society.

Toponyms are records not only of the flux and flow of cultures, but also of the changes wrought in the landscape by human activity. They recall obliterated landscape elements that were once prominent enough to elicit naming. The *-ley* or *-leigh* that designates a forest clearing now often merely implies a timbered expanse long felled by the woodsman's ax. Such names record objective detail of the physical environment, certainly, but also ancestral inhabitants' judgment of what was noteworthy about their surroundings. Thus placenames record both past environmental conditions and human perceptions of that environment.

When affixed to a portion of the Earth's surface as a name, words have procreative power. To name a place is to signify its importance in the human scheme. An unnamed stretch of territory is not a place, merely the distance between places, a place holder. Thus the mere condition of being named lends a place significance. Names, however, also play a role in the symbolic creation of place. Placenames mold our perceptions and hence our understanding of places. A name that singles out a notable trait—an outstanding physical feature, a basic economic activity, a characteristic of the inhabitants—shades first impressions. Are the denizens of *What Cheer*, Iowa, as happy-go-lucky as their town name implies? This generative power of toponyms is consciously deployed by booster-minded civic leaders or real estate dealers who select names that call up associations with things noble, inspirational,

lucrative, or fortunate. Hermeneutic interpretation of patterns in regional placenames suggests underlying differences in the value systems of regional cultures (Kelley 1999).

The connection between name and place is reflexive. Given that placenames may be inspired by a physical characteristic of the landscape or a cultural characteristic of those who settled there, it follows that a name may be taken as symbolic of a place or its inhabitants. At least that is the belief that inspires exercises in image management that lead to the replacement of names shared by people or places that have fallen out of favor. Lest "the patriotism of its residents...be judged suspect" and local businesses suffer a loss of trade during World War I, civic leaders in *Berlin*, Ontario, renamed their city for the British war hero Horatio Herbert *Kitchener* (Rayburn 1993, 92). The ability of place-names to make palpable such intangible characteristics as loyalty and patriotism and the notion that people would act on impressions garnered from a name belie the second half of Lord Byron's epigram "the glory and the nothing of a name" ("Lines on Churchill's Grave," 1. 43), implying that names are all import and no effect. A Roseville by any other name simply might not smell as sweet.

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