

## Linguistic Geographic and Toponymic Research<sup>1</sup>

RAVEN I. McDAVID, Jr.

THE STUDENT OF LINGUISTIC GEOGRAPHY and that of toponymics might well consider how they can cooperate with each other somewhat more effectively than they have done in the past. Basically, these disciplines are much alike. Neither is a pure science, but both are bridges through which many branches of learning are brought together for their mutual enrichment. Both of them draw on and contribute to the work of the social historian, the student of population origins and distributions and movements, the geographer (physical, economic, political, and cultural), the historical linguist, the structural linguist, and the like. Like almost every other discipline, only more so, these fields can be most effectively exploited by the investigator working with the materials in the field, obtaining the data from live informants and writing down the responses on the spot. Naturally, working conditions sometimes do not approach the ideal, especially when one is dealing with the geographical distribution of linguistic forms — whether verb inflections or place-name elements — at some time in the past. Under these circumstances the only evidence available may be documentary: interlinear glosses, charters, deeds, or maps. But as indispensable as documentary evidence may be under these conditions, or as helpful as it can be as supplementary evidence when an investigation is conducted in the field, the investigator should not stop with the documents when he has other ways of getting at the evidence. One smiles rightly at the attitude of one of the county officials in Georgia when I was doing the field work for the Linguistic Atlas in 1947. This functionary insisted that I need only read *Gone with the Wind* to discover what Georgia speech was actually like; and it took half

<sup>1</sup> Presented at the meeting of the American Name Society in Washington, D. C., December, 1956.

an hour of my most patient explaining to make the point that Margaret Mitchell's knowledge of southern speech and culture, though undoubtedly broad, detailed, and generally accurate, was neither encyclopedic nor infallible. Yet students of dialect have sometimes tried to use novels as primary sources, and students of place names have sometimes contented themselves with the scented nomenclature of a Chamber of Commerce map, to the neglect of the more vigorous, if often less easily printable, names actually used by the public.

Furthermore, the cultural situation in the United States — one by which cultural borrowing may operate at a distance, through such intermediaries as the newspaper, the returned war veteran, the tourist, or simply the reader of novels or history — introduces complications beyond the experience of the more stable rural areas in Europe. On the one hand, *piazza* as an architectural term was introduced into England by the architects of Covent Garden, was transferred to the columned porches of Georgian houses in eastern New England, Chesapeake Bay, and the South Atlantic coast, and has become a folk synonym for porch as far west as the Mohawk Valley in New York and the Appalachian foothills in the Carolinas and Georgia,<sup>2</sup> and new architectural fashions have established *patios* in areas far removed from any contact with Spain or Spanish colonies. On the other, the map of the United States is liberally sprinkled with Romes and Troys, with Jalapas (/jùwłáepə/ in South Carolina) and Buena Vistas (normally /byùwnə + vístə/), and even an occasional Sans Souci.

The investigation of linguistic geography or place-name distribution may serve so many purposes that the planners of such a project have the problem of limiting themselves to certain attainable objectives. In theory, at least, a project in either field is almost unlimited in its scope: the investigator of place-names would like to record all such names, and all pertinent information about them; the investigator of dialects would like to have evidence on the complete phonemic system (with occurrences of every phoneme in every possible phonemic context), a full inventory of all grammatical forms in everyday use, and a nearly complete vocabulary of the everyday language, including all the usual meanings of all the

<sup>2</sup> Hans Kurath, *A Word Geography of the Eastern United States*. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1949. P. 45; fig. 35, 43.

words. In practice, however, the investigator must settle for something less than the ideal; even the most abundantly endowed university or foundation has limits to the funds it can place at the disposal of a particular project. Competent investigators are scarce, and have many other demands on their time; and even the most cooperative and talkative informant ultimately finds his information and his patience exhausted. The annals of research bear witness to the numerous ambitious projects that broke down because they attempted too much. Two such projects were begun in Italy: the 1947 project to revise the toponymic map of the republic by including every place name, no matter how trivial, still seems far from realization; earlier (1928-43) there were nationalistically-inspired plans for a natively organized linguistic survey to put to shame the Atlas of Jaberg and Jud by employing a finer graded network (1000 communities) and a larger questionnaire (over 7000 items) than the Swiss dialectologists had used, but they collapsed upon the death of the field investigator, Hugo Pellis, with less than two-thirds of the peninsula covered.

Consequently, the interrelationships between linguistic geography and toponymic research may be limited in a particular instance by the restrictions each investigator imposes upon the scope of his project. For some particular projects the interrelationships may be very tenuous. For instance, an inquiry limited to regional distinctions in intonation patterns and terminal junctures may derive little assistance from an investigation into the names of county seats and market places, even if (as rarely happens) the investigator of place-names faithfully records pronunciation. Nevertheless, other types of phonological investigations could be aided by an accurate record of a number of place names, since such names often expand the corpus of contexts in which particular vowels and consonants may occur.

More practicable, however, for testing the relationships of these two disciplines is the assumption of neither exhaustive nor narrowly restricted projects, but rather general investigations of selected phenomena, the examination of major place names in a restricted area on the scale they would be included in, say, the Merriam-Webster *Geographical Dictionary* and a general preliminary survey of dialects, like one of the regional surveys in the American Linguistic Atlas project. And instead of listing each discipline's contri-

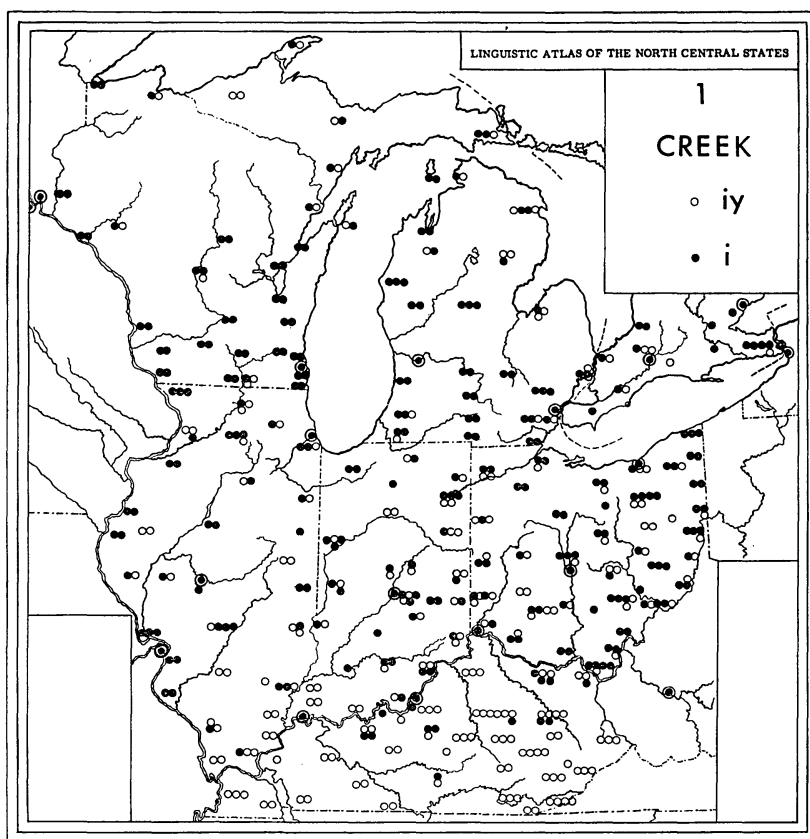
butions to the other, it is more fruitful to examine several types of linguistic phenomena to demonstrate how for each type the evidence derived from one discipline is related to the work of the other. We must make only one fundamental preliminary observation: the data of the linguistic geographer can usually be analyzed in detail for regional and social distribution, while the work of the place-name investigator cannot; on the other hand, the place-name investigator, like Raup in his study of the generics of Ohio stream names,<sup>3</sup> may bring to the immediate problem a mass of detailed evidence on a restricted number of items, so as to provide the answers to questions the linguistic geographer can only pose.

For phonology, the contribution of the place-name investigator to linguistic geography is somewhat restricted. Even where the pronunciation is faithfully recorded, the place-name study can rarely contribute much by way of phonetic detail on the pronunciation of the various phonemes in various contexts. More often, even a very broad notation of pronunciation will give important evidence as to the incidence of particular phonemes and the structure of the phonemic system in a particular dialect. Even conventional spelling of place names can be useful; true, it will conceal such regionally significant distributions as /krik/ and /kriyk/ for pronunciations of *creek* in the Middle West (see Map 1), but it may suggest the kinds of consonant clusters that occur or adduce the critical environment on which a structural statement depends.

As an example of the value of place-name evidence for structural statements, we may summarize one part of the discussion at the 1956 Texas conference on problems in English phonology.<sup>4</sup> Among the participants in the conference were several speakers of Southern and South Midland dialects who for some time had questioned whether all the phonological contrasts in their region could be handled by the Trager-Smith analysis of nine vowels and three semi-vowels (/y, w, h/, representing respectively an offglide toward high-front position, an offglide toward high-back position, and either length or an offglide toward mid-central position). In particular, it was suggested that certain dialects might have the length factor and the centering off-glide in contrast; and evidence of this con-

<sup>3</sup> H. F. Raup, "The Names of Ohio's Streams," *Names* 5. 162-168 (1957).

<sup>4</sup> To be published in 1958.



trast was offered from the dialect of Atlanta, Georgia. However most of the words in which the length factor occurred revealed it in the sequence [æ·v] as in the common nouns *salve*, *valve*, and the surnames *Cavan* and *Davin*; and in the Atlanta dialect no one could find an example of /æw/ (as in the Atlanta pronunciation of *house*) before /v/. Thus there were grounds for insisting that the phonetic sequence [æ·v] might be interpreted phonemically as [æwv]. However, the place-name *Lowville* (county seat of Lewis County, New York) was sufficient to overcome the objection, since it would normally be pronounced /læwvəl/ in Atlanta as well as in the Adirondacks.

In many other ways phonological evidence may be supplied by place names. In the superfixes, the patterns of stresses and internal

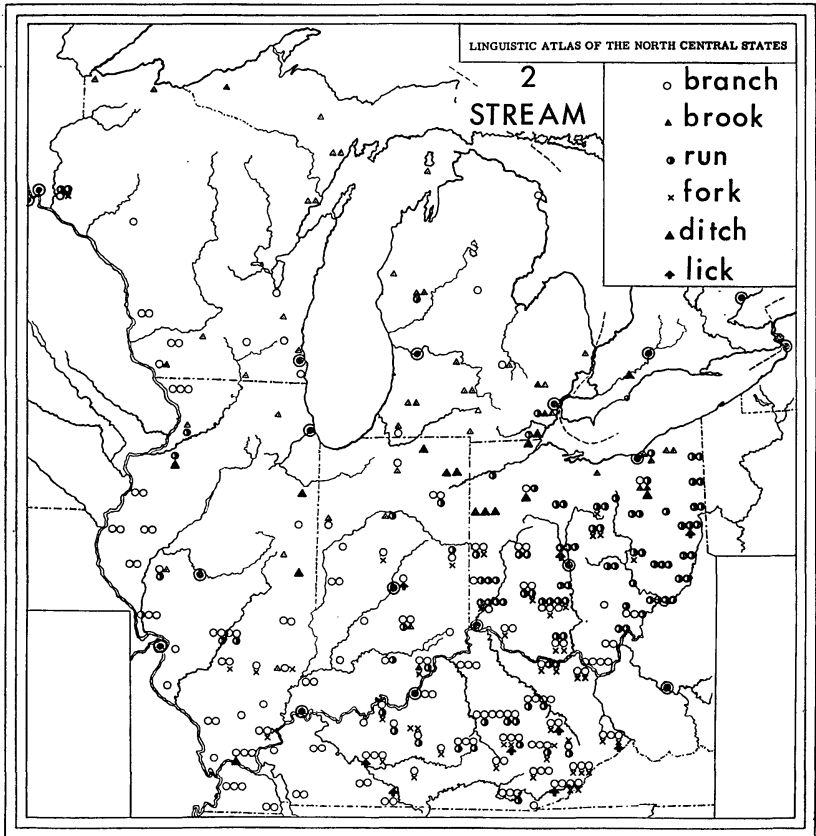
junctures, there may be evidence from the word division of names; for instance, *Pee Dee*, the official spelling of the Board of Geographic Names (not the spelling preferred by South Carolinians, I hasten to add), undoubtedly reflects the local pronunciations of the type /piy + diy/, with the word division representing the internal juncture. And in general, synchronic evidence from phonology may supply clues for place-name etymologies, which in turn will supply evidence for phonological history.

There is relatively little that toponymic research can contribute to the study of grammar, and most of that is concerned with the problems of place-name syntax. These problems are overtly concerned with the relative position of the generic and the specific, covertly with the patterns of stress and juncture. But overtly or covertly they lead ultimately to interesting facets of cultural history. *River*, for instance, nearly always follows the specific, as in *Santee River* and *Fraser River*; in the neighborhood of Detroit, however, *River Rouge* and *River Raisin* testify to the period of French sovereignty. In southern Louisiana, the stream designations *bayou* and *coulée* (both proximately, the latter ultimately as well, of French derivation) regularly precede the specific; in other parts of former French territory, however, the order has been Anglicized, as in the community name *Mound Bayou*, Mississippi, the streams *Cypress Bayou*, *Plum Bayou*, and *Bakers Bayou* in Arkansas, and *Nezpieque Bayou* in western Louisiana. *Lake* may precede or follow, the former being slightly more likely in territories once controlled by France. But we have among large lakes *Great Salt Lake* and *Lake Superior*; among small artificial lakes in the Carolinas, *Stone's Lake* and *Lake Summit*; among lowland lakes in southern Louisiana, *Lake Pontchartrain* near New Orleans and *Calcasieu Lake* to the west, near the city of *Lake Charles*. There is some evidence that the antecedent generic is becoming slightly more fashionable than the following one. A small lake in western North Carolina, in resort country, was known as *Kanuga Lake* forty years ago, now more commonly as *Lake Kanuga*; and perhaps a majority of the large artificial lakes created for irrigation and power developments follow the same pattern — *Lake Mead*, above Hoover Dam (sometime Boulder Dam) on the Colorado; *Lake Murray*, *Lake Marion*, and *Lake Moultrie* in South Carolina. Yet to this trend the area of the Tennessee Valley Authority is an exception, with *Kentucky Lake*,

*Pickwick Lake*, *Norris Lake*, and *Hiwassee Lake*, to mention a few. Are these differences matters of chance, or are there underlying cultural forces which the linguistic geographer and the toponymist might discover?

Most of the relationships between linguistic geography and toponymic research, however, concern the vocabulary. Among stream names there is the problem of number and rank in the hierarchy of stream sizes in an area; some regions distinguish only the *river* and the *creek*; others the *river*, the *creek*, and the *branch* (or some semantic equivalent for a small stream); still others may have a hierarchy of four or five sizes. Where there are three or more sizes, it is not to be assumed that the name of each type will appear with equal frequency as a common noun and as an element in place names: *branch* and *brook*, for instance, are widely known as general terms, but local informants often have difficulty naming a single specific stream of this size; *kill*, in the old Holland Dutch settlements in New York and New Jersey, is fairly common in place-names but almost never occurs as a separate word (nor does the place-name element *pol* "tidal marsh," as in *Canarsie Pol*); *run* occurs both as a common noun and as an element in place names, but more commonly as the latter. There may be clear regional distinctions in the distribution of these elements, as we find both along the Atlantic Seaboard and in the North Central States (see Map 2). *Brook* is largely confined to the New England settlement area; *run* is a North Midland term, with some occurrences in Virginia, which has been taken down the Ohio Valley from Pittsburgh as far as the neighborhood of Louisville: *branch* is characteristically Southern and South Midland. Terms largely restricted to the North Central area are *ditch*, as a designation for a running stream in flatlands, whether reclaimed marsh or prairie; *lick*, principally in the Ohio Valley between the Big Sandy and the Salt; *fork*, mostly in the knobs and mountains of Kentucky. Moreover, there is a striking correlation between the southern limits of the lexical form *run* and those of the pronunciation /krík/, not surprising to one who knows that both of these items are characteristic of the North Midland as opposed to South and South Midland.

Similarly, there are significant regional differences in the names for elevated points. Probably in most parts of the eastern United States, people are content with two terms, *mountain* and *hill*, ex-



cept for occasional local features of striking shape. In much of Kentucky, however, there is an intermediate size, the *knob*. In more broken terrain, as in western North Carolina or the Rockies, there are more specialized terms for particular shapes: *bald*, *dome*, *peak*, *pinnacle*, *butte*, *mesa*. Needless to say, the significance of each of these terms depends to some extent on the character of the surrounding terrain; *Little Mountain*, near Columbia, South Carolina, would be a very modest hill in the Blue Ridge and unnoticed in the Rockies.

When we go from generic terms to specific names we have rich sources for studying linguistic relationships of various tribal or nationality groups. Sometimes we have hidden generics in specific names: the *lac* in *Lake Mille Lacs* (Minnesota), the *bogue* in *Bogue*



*Falia River* (Mississippi), the *kill* in *Fishkill Creek* (New York), or *Brook Run* outside Richmond, Virginia; in fact, *Mississippi* itself simply means Big River, and *Michigan* Big Lake. But as a language dies out in a locality, place-names from it cease to have meaningful significance in themselves, and become merely sequences of phonemes designating particular places or things.

Finally, problems of semantics of origin may bring together the linguistic geographer, the toponymist, and the local historian for their mutual benefit. In northern West Virginia, a hypothetical *\*Spider Creek* would almost certainly owe its name to associations with arachnids; in the Adirondacks or near the Dismal Swamp, however, it might have some association with a frying pan. Or conversely, if *\*Whippletree Pass* should appear on an old travel map through the Rockies, almost certainly there were some in the original party of explorers and surveyors. In short, then, the linguistic geographer and the toponymist have many common areas of interest. They often work with different kinds of material, with differing degrees of intensity, and toward different goals; it would be foolish to ask one to do the other's work. Nevertheless, each would do well to recognize the other's field as a legitimate scholarly discipline, and be ready to utilize the answers obtained in one field as an aid toward solving the problems of the other.

University of Chicago