

# Cognitive approaches to Hungarian toponymy<sup>1</sup>

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## **Introduction**

According to the cognitive approach language is a product of the human mind, thus it can be investigated as a cognitive phenomenon. Holistic models consider it especially important that language is an integral part of the cognitive system, which is why we have to take into consideration this bi-directional connection during the examination of language. It is also important that this approach doesn't separate the language and its use from the person who's speaking. The cognitive view describes language through cognitive processes such as categorisation, prototype theory or conceptual metaphor and conceptual metonymy. Toponyms, as elements of language, are also the products of the human mind, produced by people living in communities. The cognitive aspect practically replaces the toponyms in the medium in which they function, and makes possible complex research into the use of toponyms. Therefore it seems that the cognitive approach can be used effectively in several areas of toponymy, and it can offer a solution to some questions of onomastics, that can't be answered satisfactorily by traditional means (e.g. the problem of the status of the names which are formed from geographical common nouns). Applying the cognitive view, however, such aspects concerning the usage of toponyms can be foregrounded which previously could not be raised in toponymic research (e.g. the relationship between cognitive maps and toponyms). The cognitive view is not, however, unprecedented in Hungarian toponymic studies. Nevertheless the current cognitive trends only appeared in the 2000s in Hungarian onomastic studies. In my paper I review how the cognitive approach is used in Hungarian onomastic research and consider the results of applying the cognitive view.

## **Background**

Hungarian onomastic research (especially historical onomastics) has always been open to other areas of linguistics, as well as to ways of thinking and results of related study fields. Thus the examination of linguistic signs has long involved the observation of phenomena outside of the linguistic system: besides social factors, the special features of human thinking have also been taken into consideration.

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The psychological viewpoint already appeared in studies carried out by Lajos Lőrincze. He attempted to reconstruct differences between psychological situations leading to the emergence and transformations of names (1947). However, psychological notions had been applied in the explanation of particular phenomena even before that. An example of this is Manó Kertész' theory on the evolution of the type of toponyms emerging from proper names without a formant (1939).

Nowadays in Hungary the systematic categorisation of toponyms is usually performed on the basis of István Hoffmann's typology of toponyms developed in 1993. This categorisation is basically a structuralist approach, yet several of its elements perfectly coincide with cognitive theory. When revealing the motives behind name-giving, for example, in István Hoffmann's view we need to bear in mind that name-giving is a cognitive act (1993: 44).

## The Cognitive approach

However, as a general theoretical framework, the cognitive approach appeared in Hungarian onomastics only as late as the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Nevertheless, over this short period of time it has been applied successfully in numerous fields of onomastic research.

The problem of **grammatical categorisation of word-classes and meaning** has for a long time constituted a much disputed question related to proper names both in the Hungarian and the international literature. Faced with the unsustainability of the traditional grammatical categorisation of names, András Barabás, György Kálmán C. and Ádám Nádasdy jointly published a study which—applying the pattern of thought of formal logic—eventually came to question whether proper names belong to the linguistic system at all (1977).

However, Gábor Tolcsvai Nagy approaches the question from the aspect of cognitive semantics and provides a description for names on the basis of which several further onomastic phenomena can be explained effectively. Tolcsvai's basic assumption—after Langacker (1991, 2008)—is that human cognition categorises a group of phenomena in the realm of things and entities. Words used for the linguistic expression of things are mostly nouns, that is to say, the prototypical namings of things are nouns. Also proper names frequently appear in a name-giving role. Based on their semantic features and function, therefore, according to cognitive semantics—similarly to the traditional onomastic categorisation—proper names can also be considered elements of the category of nouns that nevertheless represent a special group within the category. They can be interpreted as linguistic units, which means that their processing as proper names does not require breaking them down into linguistic elements that make up the name (Tolcsvai Nagy 2008: 31).

At the same time, between common words and proper names there exists a significant difference in meaning. Common words represent a type or one of its manifestations, and the concretisation of the thing denoted by the common word takes always place in the text through linguistic means. As opposed to this, the type and its realisation manifest simultaneously in the semantic structure of the proper name. In this way, the entity denoted by the proper name can basically be identified as unique for participants of the communicational situation, thus its identification does not necessitate comparison.

Therefore in this approach, proper names are linguistic units playing the role of nouns, i.e. similarly to nouns, they bear an encyclopaedic, notion-like meaning which for the respective speakers may either be totally schematic, or completely elaborate, with countless possible variations between the two poles (Tolcsvai Nagy 2008, Langacker 1991: 59).<sup>2</sup>

Besides the theory of cognitive semantics, various cognitive mechanisms have also been applied rather successfully to the explanation of particular onomastic phenomena. In Hungarian onomastics several researchers have attempted to create a **typology of toponyms**. The categories of these typologies do not necessarily coincide, neither can they handle well the fact that notions of particular objects may differ from region to region, just like the question of which objects are denoted by proper names. In addition, it has been articulated as a further problem that, as a rule, different types of names are not categorised on the basis of linguistic criteria, but by the types of objects.

However, according to the holistic cognitive approach, the latter concern can be eliminated, since in the mental system there exists no sharp distinction between notions and the linguistic system. Categorisation based on the principle of prototypes also seems to resolve further difficulties related to the typologisation of toponyms. According to the theory of prototypes, as a result of cognitive processes, human beings create categories that are represented by the most typical objects or their features. Studies in cognitive linguistics suggest that no sharp distinctions exist between such categories as the borders between them are often blurred. Whether an object belongs to a particular category or notion, in turn, is often determined by the resemblance of its features to the prototype of the category. Furthermore, the categories display differences at the level of communities or even individuals, reflecting cultural, social and environmental experiences (cf. Rosch 1978).

In Hungarian onomastics the applicability of prototype-theory was confirmed through the categorisation of mountain names (cf. Reszegi 2008). When deciding whether a given linguistic form can be interpreted as a mountain name we need to examine two aspects. On the one hand, we need to ascertain if the particular linguistic form is a proper name, and on the other, whether it is used to denote a mountain. However, for this purpose it is necessary to know what is considered a mountain or elevation in the given region. Individual types of toponyms— among which are included the group referring to mountains—are categories reflecting our everyday notions about the world. From the aspect of name usage therefore it is not necessarily relevant how many meters high the elevation called 'mountain' (*hegy*) is. It is not the absolute height, but the characteristics of the landscape that are important in the naming.

The theory of prototypes can be extended also to the description of **linguistic categories and word classes** (cf. Ladányi 1998: 410). According to this, linguistic categories also have typical and peripheral elements, depending on whether they bear the morphologic, syntactic and semantic, etc. features characterising the prototype of the particular category.

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2 In the international literature, besides Langacker's theory the concept of Van Langendonck also has a considerable effect on name studies. However, in Hungarian onomastics no researchers having hitherto investigated place names have accepted this concept of meaning (1999, 2007).

Based on these notions, I have attempted to shed new light on the question of toponyms that have identical forms with geographic common words (Reszegi 2009a). In the language use of any community a common word denoting a whole class of things may evolve in a new direction, obtaining the meaning of a proper name, undergoing a transformation to denote a single entity belonging to the type. Nevertheless, we are often faced with the difficulty of the decision whether such linguistic elements indeed bear the value of proper names. In connection with the evolution of the word's meaning as a proper name, notably, not only the competence of the descriptive linguist, but also that of the general language user is uncertain (Hoffmann 1993: 94).

The question is interlinked with two opposing concepts on the emergence of names. Earlier it was a widely held opinion that common words gradually become proper names. Recently, however, researchers have emphasised the role of conscious name-giving. According to this view, speakers of a language create place names after already existing models in their toponymic system. The uncertainty surrounding the determination of the value as proper name or common word (of purely geographical common word names) nevertheless indicates that in the case of some names we should take into consideration the possibility of the gradual toponymisation of common words. This concept is underpinned in the study carried out by Andrea Heinrich examining the field names of a settlement. In the consciousness of the population of the settlement geographic common names are not necessarily distinguished from the proper names that have evolved from them. Some places are always referred to using geographical common words, yet in the population's language usage some geographical common words serve both as common words and proper names. In addition, Heinrich also records the process of transforming common words into proper names (2000: 14–15).

The uncertainty of categorisation related to pure geographical common word toponyms is a necessary consequence of the gradual transformation into a name. According to a study which I carried out on a non-representative sample, nowadays for most users of the Hungarian language the category of toponyms, particularly microtoponyms is mostly represented by two-part place names, that is to say, most speakers consider the types of names like *Nyerges-hegy* (< *nyereg* + *-s* 'saddle-shaped' + *hegy* 'mountain'), *Zörgő-ér* ('rattling + rivulet'), *Egyházsvizsoly* ('settlement called Vizsoly that has a church' < *egyház* 'church' + *-s* topoformant + *Vizsoly* settlement name) typical toponyms (Reszegi 2009b). Furthermore, the names created with topoformants are also typical toponyms. This is underpinned by the considerable number of name forms to be found in literary works which were created by authors with the help of different formants (cf. Bényei 2007). Toponyms which are formally identical with geographical common words are obviously peripheral elements to the category of toponyms, representing a transition between toponyms and common words. Of course, the existence and extendedness of this transitory category may also display individual differences.

Taking all this into consideration, the study explores the factors which result in the identification of forms of geographical common words as proper names, leading to a change of perspective in the language users' linguistic consciousness and a shift between categories.

In Hungarian onomastic research **metonymical name-giving and metonymical name usage** have also undergone re-interpretation from a cognitive aspect (Reszegi 2009b).

According to the cognitive approach, metonymy can be considered a general cognitive ability through which we are able to create associations between things and notions that are linked in one way or the other, in this way also being able to make conclusions from one to the other. The condition for their operation is the inconsistency of the mental representations of two contiguous elements (the eliminated and the preserved one). Based on this, the linguistic realisation of metonymy does not involve a change of meaning. In the case of frequent common usage it can happen however that a meaning resulting from the context starts to be used as the meaning of a word in the sentence—although this already constitutes a phenomenon belonging to polysemy. In other cases, presumably, the schemes themselves are re-evaluated, coming to serve as bases for polysemous meanings (cf. Lakoff–Johnson 1980, Lakoff 1987).

According to this approach, in the usage of toponyms, cases when a place is temporarily (or even regularly) referred to with the name of a connected, more prominent, or more important place can be considered manifestations of linguistic metonymy. At the same time it is not rare even among proper names that—due to the metonymic approach or frequent usage—the meaning of a name changes and becomes polysemous. Based on such naming patterns, new places are named again with the name of a connected place or person. In traditional typology this is called metonymical name-giving. However, in cognitive-minded onomastic research this process needs to be distinguished also in relation to proper names from the manifestation of linguistic metonymy. In the case of place names contact only constitutes a motivation for the emergence of polysemous meanings. Therefore we need to differentiate between the naming method resulting in polysemous meaning, defined as metonymy in structuralist name-typology, and metonymy that does not involve change of meaning and which—relying on the use of terms from cognitive linguistics—should rather be called metonymically motivated name-giving. The phenomenon can be compared to the metonymically motivated emergence of polysemous common words.

Later the names that have evolved in this way as well as the adjoining cognitive schemes may serve as basis for further name-giving acts. That is why metonymically motivated name-giving can mostly be linked to a single act of name-giving, so the transition in the course of which the name comes to denote another place is not a long process.

A characteristic form of metonymically motivated name-giving is when the name of a place starts to be used to denote another place connected to it. From this aspect the semantic content of individual name elements is not significant (transparent names can also be transferred to denote other places, cf. *Sáros-patak* 'muddy brook' > *Sárospatak* 'settlement at brook called Sárospatak'). It seems, however, that through perception and cognition we process the connection between different types of places in different ways, we interpret them differently, which obviously affects the name-giving process too. Based on this, in certain cases we can clearly identify the metonymically motivated name-giving, whereas in other cases a different mode of the emergence of the name seems more likely.

Identical namings of places which—based on processes of perception and cognition—are less closely connected, can clearly be considered examples of metonymically motivated name-giving,

such as settlement names emerging from natural namings (e.g. *Sárospatak*, *Hegyeshalom* 'settlement called Hegyeshalom' < 'piked mound').

The names of forests and mountains clearly demonstrate the opposite case, where places closely belong together. Examining the onomastic corpus of Hegyköz region in northern Hungary, it seems that nowadays name-users hardly distinguish between the naming of a high ground and the forest covering it. In most cases, a single name form is used to denote both types of places: e.g. the names *Halyagos* 'covered with bladder-nut trees' (Kováts 2000: 78), *Pajna* 'mountain called Pajna' (164) or *Nagy-Milic* 'big mountain called Milic' (122) refer both to the mountain and the forest covering it. However, instead of metonymical name-giving, in this case the phenomenon is more likely to result from the fact that, in the linguistic consciousness of the community, the two places cannot be clearly separated from one other. The results of my own collection also seem to confirm that very often a particular name refers to the entire hill, together with the forest covering it and the clearing, etc. In fact, hardly ever does the need arise to distinguish between the mountain and the forest covering it by giving them different names (cf. Reszegi 2007). As a result of the cognitive process therefore, the individual does not sharply separate the elevation from the forest covering it, as the two objects are in fact processed as a single denotate. This approach is also supported by the name usage, i.e. the relationship is mutual: the names belonging together do not have separate names, therefore the denotates are not considered separate objects either. In conclusion, with respect to the current situation, in this case we cannot really talk about a metonymically motivated name usage.

In the holistic-minded mental system, language and, within language, toponymic representations constituting part of the mental lexicon, are interrelated with spatial representations. Taking this idea as a starting point, in recent Hungarian onomastic research several studies have highlighted a thus far neglected question of onomastics, namely the **relation between the mental map and toponyms**.

The establishment and maintenance of the connection between the mental map and language is facilitated by the fact that in addition to physical perception, linguistic stimuli also play a role in the emergence of spatial representations: human beings grow up hearing speech about space (in some cases certain pieces of spatial information become available to us merely through linguistic mediation), and the notions processed in this way become incorporated into the individual's mental map. In this connection we should keep in mind that people become acquainted with and acquire their knowledge about the world in a community, whose behavioural patterns and communication deeply influence their emerging cognitive system. Therefore speech, on the one hand, mediates spatial notions, and on the other, through the articulation of spatial information, via certain linguistic forms with spatial reference, such as inflexions in the Hungarian language, it helps to make individual cognitive maps—which differ due to categorisation processes—similar to one other (Reszegi 2012).

The usage of toponyms may prove helpful in revealing the organisation of the cognitive map. Andrea Heinrich takes this as her starting point when, examining the toponyms of a particular settlement, she attempts to unveil the respective name users' cognitive maps (2000). She points out

that the relations of the cognitive map ABOVE vs. BELOW and INSIDE vs. OUTSIDE are not organised according to real verticality; instead, their perception is guided by some hierarchical relation (centre and periphery). Studying the spatial-referential elements of toponyms of a particular settlement, Mária Hochbauer (2008) also recorded that the spatial dimensions of the empirical world are represented somewhat differently in language. The linguistic world perceives even the horizontal as vertical, therefore in fact semantic correlations are concentrated around two poles in the language usage of the given settlement: LOWER–INTERIOR–FRONTAL–LEFT–SMALL–PROXIMAL vs. UPPER–EXTERIOR–REAR–RIGHT–BIG–DISTANT.

The usage of names may reflect differences between the speakers' spatial concepts. In Hungarian no articles are used before names of settlements, but micro-toponyms are preceded by articles (though the reason for this fact has not been investigated yet either from traditional nor cognitive positions). Older speakers in the settlements studied by Andrea Heinrich use the names of the nearby locations *Karoly* and *Liget* with articles, similarly to the field names, since in their eyes the two places with their immigrant population 'do not qualify as real, prototypical settlements'. However, the younger generations do not make the same distinction: similarly to the names of other neighbouring settlements, they use also these ones without articles (2000: 9).

The concept of the cognitive map can also be applied successfully in the historic research of toponyms. Erzsébet Győrffy studied the features of the name usage of ancient Hungarian names of different river sections (2009) and, based on the model of the cognitive map, she concluded that the use of the names of particular river sections was typical within certain closed communities. Thus the names of the sections of the same stream or river do not have a synonymic relation to each other.

At the same time, based on the theory of spatial orientation, we may make some general onomastic-theoretical conclusions. Earlier it was one of the basic assumptions of Hungarian onomastics that toponyms are primarily used to facilitate human orientation in space. However, according to the cognitive approach, spatial orientation does not so much depend on our knowledge of toponyms (that is, the linking of places with names), but it presupposes storing several other types of knowledge (such as points of orientation, directions, border-lines and distances), thus spatial orientation is largely guided by the structure of our cognitive/mental map (the cognitive representation of space) (cf. Heinrich 2000: 5, Reszegi 2012).

Taking into account the results of research carried out from a cognitive aspect, the need has recently arisen in Hungarian onomastic research for a **functionalist typology of toponyms** that takes into consideration both community name usage and mental processes. These are the grounds on which István Hoffmann has reshaped his fundamental principles on the typology of toponyms. One of his most crucial conclusions is the idea that in the course of the individual's acquisition of names through cognitive processing, becoming acquainted with each and every new name also means semantic re-creation of the given name, and representation of the names may even change during their later usage. That is to say, the pieces of semantic content expressed in names do not directly represent the world, but our notions of the world. Should we, in turn, look upon toponyms as part of the mental system, the historic justification for semantic motivation loses its relevance (2012).

## Conclusions

As the above outline shows, the cognitive approach has been applied rather successfully in Hungarian onomastic research. At the same time, the results go beyond the scope of Hungarian onomastic research and, I believe, some aspects of onomastic theory and methodology can be used even at an international level in onomastic research.

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### **Summary: Cognitive approaches to Hungarian toponymy**

Hungarian onomastic research has always been open to other areas of linguistics, as well as to ways of thinking and results of related study fields. The psychological viewpoint already appeared in studies in the 1940s. However, as a general theoretical framework, the cognitive approach appeared in Hungarian onomastics only as late as the early 21st century. Nevertheless, over this short period of time it has been applied successfully in numerous fields of onomastic research. In my paper I review how the cognitive approach is used in Hungarian onomastic research and consider the results of applying the cognitive view: with connection the problem of grammatical categorisation of word-classes and meaning; the typology of toponyms; the metonymical name-giving and metonymical name usage; the relation between the mental map and toponyms; the functionalist typology of toponyms.

### **Résumé: Approches cognitives de la toponymie hongroise**

La recherche onomastique hongroise a toujours été ouverte aux autres domaines de la linguistique, de même qu'aux méthodologies et résultats des champs d'études connexes. Le point de vue psychologique est déjà apparu dans nos études dans les années 1940. Toutefois, en tant que cadre théorique général, l'approche cognitive n'est pas apparue dans l'onomastique hongroise avant le début des années 2000. Nonobstant, pendant ce court laps de temps, elle a été appliquée avec succès dans de nombreux champs de la recherche onomastique. Dans cet article, j'étudie comment l'approche cognitive est employée dans la recherche onomastique hongroise et ses résultats : en relation avec la question de la catégorisation grammaticale des classes de mots et du sémantisme ; la typologie des toponymes ; la nomination métonymique et l'emploi des noms métonymiques ; la relation entre carte mentale et toponymes ; la typologie fonctionnaliste des toponymes.

### **Zusammenfassung: Kognitive Ansätze zur ungarischen Toponymie**

Die ungarische Namenforschung ist stets offen für andere Bereiche der Sprachwissenschaft gewesen, wie auch für die Denkweisen und Ergebnisse benachbarter Disziplinen. Der psychologische Standpunkt war bereits in Studien der 1940er Jahre aufgetaucht; doch als allgemeines theoretisches Gerüst erschien der kognitive Ansatz als erst zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts. Trotzdem ist er seither in dieser kurzen Zeit auf zahlreichen Gebieten der Onomastik erfolgreich angewandt worden. In meinem Beitrag gebe ich einen Überblick über die Arten der Verwendung dieses kognitiven Ansatzes in der ungarischen Namenforschung und untersuche die Ergebnisse der kognitiven Sichtweise: in Zusammenhang mit der Frage der Kategorisierung von Wortklassen und ihrer Semantik sowie der Typologie der Ortsnamen; in Bezug auf die metonymische Namengebung und den metonymischen Namengebrauch; auf das Verhältnis zwischen kognitiver Landkarte und Ortsnamen; sowie schließlich auf die funktionalistische Typologie der Toponyme.