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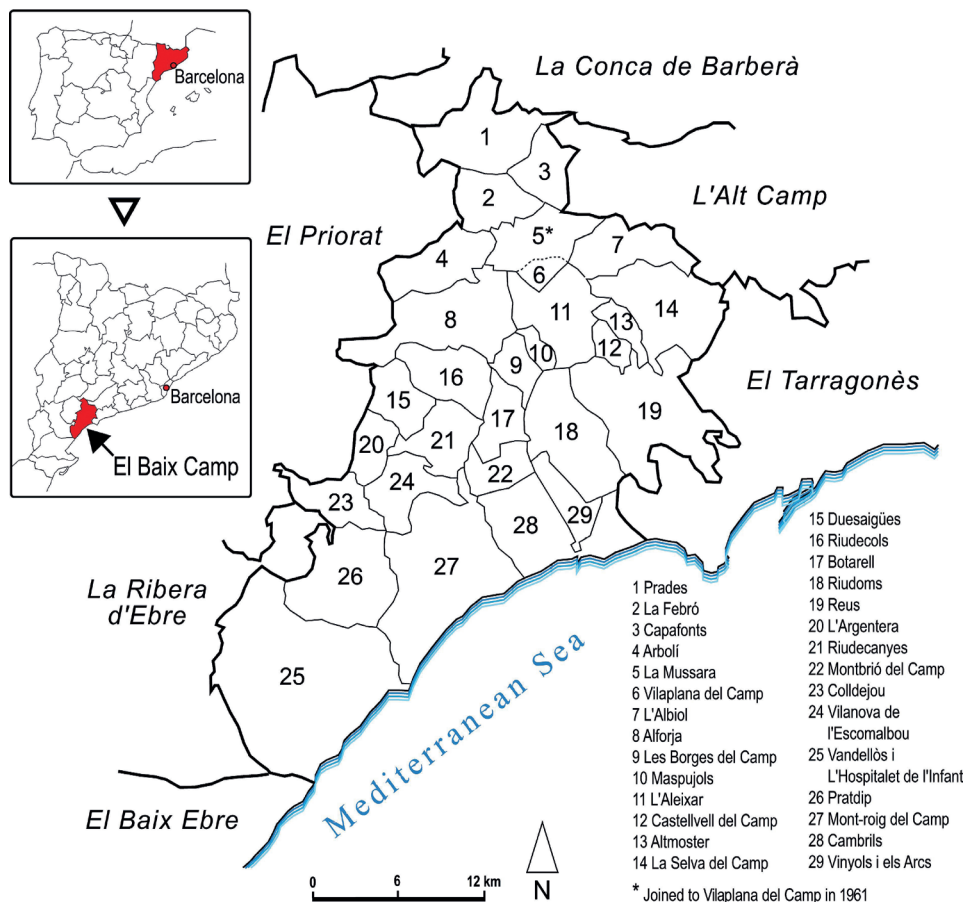
‘Microtoponymy’ as a key for geographical description A case study in Catalonia, Spain

1. Introduction

The study of toponyms at the micro-scale – or *microtoponymy* – is of great interest for the onomastician. Generally speaking, place names provide us with a rich and diverse source of information about the geographical space (and, moreover, about the *landscape*: a key concept in the study and interpretation of this space). Within this framework, I argue that microtoponyms, considered in terms of their “spatial meaning,” can be an excellent tool not only for geographers, but also for historians and linguists (as well as other professionals) as they seek to provide through the study of place names a better understanding of reality surrounding us.

This paper is based on a wider onomastic study conducted in the *comarca* or district of El Baix Camp, in the province of Tarragona (Catalonia, Spain).¹ In this district, extending over an area of 695 km² and with a population of 193,500 inhabitants (2012), a geographical analysis of its microtoponymy was undertaken. This study enables us to interpret the broad relationship established between the *comarca*’s names, places and landscapes.

¹ The study, the author’s thesis (*Els noms de lloc i el territori. Una interpretació geogràfica de la toponímia del Baix Camp, Tarragona*), involved, in part, a detailed examination of the microtoponymy of El Baix Camp. This article is based on the chapter entitled *El Baix Camp com a sistema toponímic: estudi dels topònims de la comarca, la seva distribució i la seva significació territorial*. See Tort-Donada [2002].



Map 1. The *comarca* of El Baix Camp (Tarragona, Catalonia, Spain). General location (design: Alexis Sancho)

2. The toponymy of El Baix Camp. General characteristics

The starting point for this study was the creation of a general corpus of place names for the *comarca*. This corpus, based on an exhaustive study (cartographic survey, bibliographic research, personal interviews), seeks to reflect the *living* toponymy, that is, the place names used on a daily basis in the *comarca* of El Baix Camp at the moment of undertaking the research. In short, the aim was to record in detail the present-day toponymy of this district (a toponymy which should largely be classed as a *microtoponymy*).



Photo 1. A general view of El Baix Camp from La Mussara high lands (photo: J. T.)

Table 1 provides a summary of the data contained in this general corpus of place names in El Baix Camp. Overall, the corpus contains a total of 16,483 toponyms. This figure, divided by the *comarca*'s 695.27 km² of surface area, represents a “toponymic density” of 23.70 toponyms per km².

Table 1. Toponymy of El Baix Camp. General parameters

Total n° of toponyms:	16,483
Area of the <i>comarca</i> :	695.27 km ²
Toponymic density (toponyms/km ²):	23.70
Extrapolated to whole of Catalonia (31,931.83 km ²):	756,784 toponyms
Total n° of toponyms referring to the physical environment:	5,249
Toponymic density (toponyms/km ²):	7.55
Total n° of toponyms referring to the human environment:	11,234
Toponymic density (toponyms/km ²):	16.16
Total n° of toponyms taken from onomastic inventory:	15.063 (91.4% of total)
Territory covered (km ²):	451.04 (64.9% of the total)
Toponymic density (toponyms/km ²):	33.4
Extrapolated to whole of Catalonia:	1,066,523
Total n° of toponyms taken from map sources:	1420 (8.6% of total)
Territory covered (km ²):	244.23 (35.1% of total)
Toponymic density (toponyms/km ²):	5.8
Extrapolated to whole of Catalonia:	185,205

Source: based on information contained in Tort's onomastic appendix (2002).



Photo 2. Vilaplana, a little village towards the North (photo: J. T.)

3. A classification of the toponymy of El Baix Camp based on geographical criteria

For methodological purposes, we first needed to provide a classification of the toponymy before preceding with our research. The aim of such a classification was to be able to order the 16,483 toponyms we had recorded in a logical and coherent manner, while recognising the obvious limitations of any typology or classificatory system. The classification has been made by adhering primarily to geographical criteria and by taking into consideration the unique characteristics of the *comarca* of El Baix Camp. Below we summarise this classification, which comprises two main groups: the toponymy of the physical environment, and the toponymy of the human environment.

A. Toponymy of the physical environment: A.a. Oronymy; a.1. Positive relief features; a.2. Negative relief features; a.3. Neutral relief features; a.4. Coastal oronyms. A.b. Hydronymy; b.1. Major watercourses; b.2. Minor watercourses; b.3. Specific hydronymic elements. A.c. General names of places and sites of the physical environment; c.1. Land divisions; c.2. Other land sites, or spots; c.3. Woods and woodland; c.4. Unique trees.

B. Toponymy of the human environment: B.a. Toponymy of human settlements; a.1. Grouped settlements; a.2. Scattered settlements. B.b. Toponymy of complementary aspects of human settlement, and human economic activity; b.1. Auxiliary buildings; b.2. Complementary elements of the settlement; b.3. Agricultural elements; b.4. Elements related to other economic activities (above all, industry and trade); b.5. Unique buildings and other distinctive elements. B.c. Toponymy of transport networks; c.1. Transport networks in general; c.2. Specific places and sites related to transport networks.

C. Another toponymy: C.a. Exotoponymy. C.b. Thalassotoponymy.

4. Conceptual explanation of the classification

Logically, the most basic differentiation that can be drawn in the toponymy of a given territory are the place names that refer to its *physical environment*, on the one hand, and those that refer directly or indirectly to its *human environment*, on the other. While methodologically speaking we accept this distinction, we nevertheless have certain reservations in using it: we are fully aware that human perception does not naturally recognise such a categorisation but tends rather to perceive territory and space as a *continuous whole*.

a) Toponymy of the physical environment (A). Among the toponymy of the physical environment, we can, to all intents and purposes, distinguish three main blocks: the oronymy (the names attributed to units of relief and landforms), the hydronymy (names corresponding to water courses and natural bodies of water) and the names of specific places and sites in the physical environment in general.



Photo 3. Agricultural and forest land in Masos de Galceran (municipality of La Febró) (photo: J. T.)

The names under the heading of *oronymy* (A.a.) are divided into the following four sections:

A.a.1. *Positive relief features*: this section includes toponyms alluding to relief features that rise above the landscape, i.e., physical landforms that stand out above the line of the horizon. Here we include all the toponyms that respond to this basic idea and which in the *comarca* of El Baix Camp typically correspond to the following geographical common nouns in Catalan (English orientative correspondences provided here and in the other sections): *mntanyes* (mountains), *serres* (upland areas), *serrats* (mountain chains), *moles* (hillocks), *tossals* (low ridges), *puigs* (hills), *cims* (peaks), *carenes* (crests), *roques* (rocks), *pedres* (stones), *puntes* (points), *cingles* (craggs), *cingleres* (cliffs), *cinglalls* (rocky outcrops), *solans* (sunny slopes), *obacs* (shady slopes), *costes* (hillsides), *costers* (slopes), *pedregals* (rocky ground).

A.a.2. *Negative relief features*: in this section the point of reference of the toponyms is the opposite to that described above; that is, relief features and landforms that lie below the level of the horizon, as depressions, caves or “empty spaces.” Here the most frequently occurring Catalan common nouns in El Baix Camp are the following: *colls* (mountain passes), *collets* (little hills), *collades* (depressions), *clots* (hollows), *clotades* (coombes), *fondos* (valley bottoms), *valls* (valleys), *estrets* (gorges), *racons* (niches), *comes* (deep hollows), *comellars* (valley bottoms), *avencs* (chasms), *coves* (caves), *forats* (holes), *balmes* (caverns), *salts* (gaps), *timbes* (precipices) and *canals* (slope grooves).

A.a.3. *Neutral relief features*: halfway between the previous two groups, neutral relief features are landforms that lie at the level of the horizon. We refer to the *plans* (flat lands) and *planes* (plains) – these being the two most common or generic denominations in use.

A.a.4. *Coastal oronyms*: we have opted to consider coastal relief forms under a separate heading, given their specific qualities. Here we find a number of generic names in use, such as *puntes* (points), *cales* (coves) and *platges* (beaches). We also include in this section, the *comarca*’s coastal ponds since their formation has tended to be closely associated with the evolution of the coastline.

In the block dedicated to *hydronymy* (A.b.), we have created three specific sections:

A.b.1. *Major watercourses*: given that the *comarca* does not have a hydrographic network that includes any major rivers (at least, when compared to the rivers of the rest of Catalonia), we consider its “major watercourses” to be those that in general have a permanent nature. Typically, these are drainage systems that in the local geographic nomenclature are referred to as *rius* (rivers) or *rieres* (streams).

A.b.2. *Minor watercourses*: these then are all the non-permanent watercourses; in other words, all the courses that locally are neither referred to as “*rius*” or “*rieres*.” Among the most common nouns that occur, we find *barrancs* (ravines), *torrents* (torrents), *rases* (ditches), *xaragalls* (gullies), *córrecs* (stream-beds) and *aigüeres* (sinks).

A.b.3. *Specific hydronymic elements*: while the previous two sections include concepts of a linear nature or that follow a linear course, in this section we include hydronymic concepts that are of a more punctual spatial nature. We refer to what in the local generic nomenclature are elements such as *gorgs* and *tolls* (river pools), *salts* (waterfalls), *surgències* (springs and other natural water sources) and *estanys* (inland ponds).

Within the group of toponyms referring to the physical environment, this leaves the block corresponding to the *general names of places and sites of the physical environment* (A.c.). We have divided these into four main sections:

A.c.1. *Land divisions*: here we include the areas, of varying degrees of extension, of a municipality that are known by a specific toponym, and which, from a spatial perspective, present a certain degree of homogeneity derived from their physical features, their economic land use or the structure of their agricultural landownership. They are usually referred to, both in Spain and in Catalonia, as a *partida* (or *partida de terra*). In practice, their precise definition (even in terms of land demarcation) is difficult, at times even impossible. It is, as such, a highly particular concept, and one that could be considered just as easily to form part of the “physical” or the “human” environments. For the purposes of this study, we have opted for the former.



Photo 4. Mediterranean crops in the coastal lands of the Southeast (photo: J. T.)

A.c.2. *Other land sites or spots* (in the sense of “small space or extent of ground;”² corresponding to the Catalan word *paratge*). This section serves to

² *The Oxford Universal Dictionary Illustrated*, “Spot,” senses III.2.b and III.3, 1970: 1980.

complement the preceding section. We have opted to include here all the elements of the physical environment (those that occur throughout the area and those of a quite specific nature) identified by a toponym, but which cannot be conceptualised as a land division or the equivalent of any other category defined above. It is, in short, a very specific category that is best defined in relation to the other categories: a veritable “ragbag” within the section of the physical environment, with all the necessary reservations this implies.

A.c.3. *Woods and woodland*: in the municipalities of El Baix Camp lying furthest inland, the forest mantle acquires a certain importance. Moreover, until the middle of the present century the economic exploitation of these woodlands was important locally (especially, as a source of wood and charcoal). For this reason, the forests are a significant element in the place names of these municipalities. Moreover, despite being an ambivalent concept in terms of their classification (the woods could have been conceptualised as an element related to economic activities), their importance at the level of the physical environment has led us to include them within this larger group, and to differentiate them within this specific section.

A.c.4. *Unique trees*: in common with other elements of the physical environment (including rock formations and specific relief features of a massif or mountain), there are a number of trees whose unique characteristics have resulted in their being given a name. These have become part of the local toponymic heritage just as any other name of spatial reference. Typically the reason for such individualisation lies in the specific qualities of the tree in question, which have created the need for a name that allows it to be distinguished. The case of trees with their own name (strictly speaking, a phytonym) illustrates how the origin of place names and the perception of singularities in space are two closely linked processes.

b) Toponymy of the human environment (B). In this group, which we have structured in accordance with the same logic as for the overall organisation, three separate blocks of place names can be identified: the toponymy related to the *comarca*’s human settlements, the toponymy of complementary aspects of human settlement and human economic activity, and, finally, the toponymy of the transport networks, also referred to as “odonymy” [Dorion, Poirier 1975: 99]. We are dealing, in each case, with concepts that are the subjects of a fairly conventional differentiation, but which have in common the fact of referring to manifestations of human activity that have an explicit impact on the territory in which they occur, and which present a high degree of interconnection.

The first block includes the *toponymy of human settlements* (B.a.). In this section the place names refer to human settlements in their broadest sense, that is, the places that constitute the focal points of daily life in the *comarca* and where man has chosen to locate his permanent residences. Here two sections can be identified according to their generic nature:



Photo 5. Olive grove landscape in the vicinity of Mont-roig del Camp (photo: J. T.)

B.a.1. *Grouped settlements*: in other words, toponyms that refer to human settlements in their collective sense: basically, nuclei of population at all levels of the scale at which such nuclei might be considered to operate; but also areas within the nuclei that can be sufficiently differentiated in terms of human perception (both internally and externally) so as to give rise to a specific toponym: for example, *veïnats* (neighbourhoods), *barris* (the different quarters of a town) and *urbanitzacions* (housing estate developments).

B.a.2. *Scattered settlements*: In this section, the idea of human settlement is considered at the individual or unique dimension. In other words, the intention of this section is to group together all the toponyms that refer to specific or particular examples of human settlement: normally *cases* (houses), *masos* (farmsteads) and *habitatges* (dwelling places in general).

In the block entitled the *toponymy of complementary aspects of the human settlement and human economic activity* (B.b.), we can identify five separate sections:

B.b.1. *Auxiliary buildings*: this includes all toponyms referring to buildings and dwelling places that are obviously auxiliary to the principal buildings. In the specific context of El Baix Camp, these are typically scattered constructions referred to as *casetes* (cabins), *masets* (auxiliary constructions to the main farmhouse) or *barraques* (shacks).

B.b.2. *Complementary elements of the settlement*: in this case the basic idea is the complementary nature of the element in question with respect to a given human settlement. Among the elements of this nature that have given rise to

toponyms on quite a regular basis we find *basses* (ponds), *pous* (wells), *fonts* (fountains), *mines* (mines), *deposits* (reservoirs), *rescloses* (dams), *abeuradors* (troughs), *canals* (canals), *recs* (ditches) and *sèquies* (irrigation channels). In fact, in almost all instances the elements are related to some form of water supply and provision (and which, for this reason, have strong links with the human settlement). However, we have considered them as a category in their own right for the sake of “thematic homogeneity” (and because, in this regard, they represent a very frequent type of toponym throughout the *comarca*) and not because, objectively, we believe they can be clearly differentiated from other general categories.

B.b.3. *Agricultural elements*: the traditional economy of El Baix Camp has been essentially founded on agricultural activities, and this has given rise to the notable presence of toponyms related to this activity. For this reason, we have created a specific section, in which we have incorporated generic concepts that have given rise to a great number of toponyms, such as *eres* (farmyards), *corrals* (corrals), *horts* (orchards), *trossos de terra* (plots of land), *conreus* (crops), *prats* (meadows), *prades* (pastures), *sorts* (lots of land), *sènies* (waterwheels), *granges* (farms) and *finques* (farming estates in general).



Photo 6. The coastline to the South. Beach at Hospitalet de l’Infant (photo: J. T.)

B.b.4. *Elements related to other economic activities (above all, industry and trade)*. Although economic activities that are not strictly agricultural have given rise to a smaller number of toponyms than activities related to farming, their importance is nevertheless historically quite significant. Yet, it should be stressed again perhaps that it is the traditional activities that have produced the largest number of place names in this particular area. However, we should point out that we have also taken into consideration place names related to modern industrial plants and factories, provided we can speak of “toponyms” in the genuine sense of the word, and not simply administrative or commercial names. We should stress, moreover, that we have grouped together in this section place names related to generic concepts such as *molins* (mills), *fàbriques* (factories), *cellers* (wine cellars), *premses* (presses), *neveres* or *pous de gel* (ice houses³), *bòbiles* (brick-kilns), *pedreres* (quarries), *magatzems* (warehouses), *mines extractives* (mines) and *forns* (kilns), among others.

B.b.5. *Unique buildings and other distinctive elements*. Finally, this section is designed as a category in which we can include all elements related to human settlements that are highly distinctive in their own right, or which cannot be easily attributed to any of the other four sections described above. In addition, the function of many of these elements has changed over time, and this makes a purported “objectification” of their meaning as spatial referents even more difficult. Among the generic concepts referred to by these toponyms we find buildings providing a service of some sort or other: *esglésies* (churches), *ermites* (hermitages), *capelles* (chapels), *creus* (crosses), *vestigis* (historical remains), *terres* (lands), *castells* (castles), *fites* (landmarks) and other similar elements.

The last block in the field of toponymy relative to the human environment goes under the heading of *toponymy of transport networks* (B.c.). It comprises two sections:

B.c.1. *Transport networks in general*: this group includes all the toponyms, found in both rural and urban environments, referring to transport networks and communication links in their broadest sense. It is in fact an extremely rich thematic area in terms of toponyms, and includes a highly diverse range of generic concepts; among others, we find *carreteres* (highways), *camins* (roads), *carrers* (streets), *travessies* (walkways), *avingudes* (avenues), *passeigs* (boulevards), *passatges* (passages), *corredors* (corridors), *carrerades* (cattle crossings), *rondes* (ring roads), *corralons* (narrow passages), *pujades* (rises), *baixades* (dips), *drecceres* (shortcuts), *autopistes* (motorways) and *vies fèrries* (railways). It is worth pointing out, in relation to this section, that the basic criterion applied has been to consider whether the toponym in question refers to a geographical element that serves the function of a “transport link;” given the specific nature of this function,

³ Ancient buildings for storing ice, generally located in the highest slopes of western municipalities of El Baix Camp.

we deemed it unnecessary to subdivide this section into internal categories (which might have distorted the basic sense of the approach adopted).

B.c.2. *Specific places and sites related to transport networks*: in this section the underpinning idea is not the transport networks themselves, but rather specific places or sites of a transport link that have received a specific name; in parallel with the approach taken in the preceding section, we include here both the toponyms found in rural and urban environments. Among the most typical generic concepts in this group we find *places* (squares), *porxos* (archways), *portals* (gateways), *ponts* (bridges), *passos* (passes), *graus* (steps), *pujadors* (upward inclines), *baixadors* (downward inclines), *escales* (steps) and *tombs* (turns).



Photo 7. Tourist housing developments (Hospitalet de l'Infant) (photo: J. T.)

c) Another toponymy (C). Finally, we have created an additional toponymic group in which we include the toponyms that are not readily incorporated in any of the other categories established up to this point and which, for this reason, we have classified as “other toponyms.” In this group we have identified two blocks of names: exotoponyms and thalassonyms, the meaning and extent of which we describe below.

C.a. *Exotoponymy*. We speak of *exotoponyms* in reference to toponyms that, while forming part of the local “geographical memory” that is, they belong to a given municipal district, in fact, refer to a spatial element located outside the municipality in question. In essence, therefore, they are geographical elements of some importance, at least from the perception of the settlement in which they have been gathered. However, for the purposes of this study they are toponyms of secondary importance, since, by referring to distant geographical elements, their local importance is minor.

C.b. *Thalassotoponymy*. We speak of *thalassonyms* (or *thalassotoponyms*) in reference to the generic toponyms of the sea in their various forms. While these names originate from the coastal strip of El Baix Camp (which extends through the municipalities of Cambrils, Mont-roig del Camp and Vandellòs i l’Hospitalet de l’Infant), they often refer to places located at some distance from the coast. For this reason, and taking into account that they are highly specific toponyms, we have considered them within a separate block.

5. Final reflections

A typology or conceptual classification of toponyms, compiled on the basis of logical criteria, is by no means a matter of secondary importance. It serves the purpose of providing scholars of place names (be they linguists, historians, geographers or experts from any other discipline) with clear referents regarding the *spatial dimension* of the toponyms with which they work – somewhat similar in this respect to “spatial coordinates” which, when applied to the set of names under study, enable scholars to obtain additional information about the “relative” meaning of these toponyms. In other words: in a given region or space, it allows us to know whether one type of toponym is more dominant than another; the varying degree of importance (depending on the concept) some toponyms have when compared to others; which semantic fields are most often found together, and what consequences we might expect, from the point of view of the toponymy, of their greater affinity (or, alternatively, of the absence of a given type of toponym).



Photo 8. La Mussara, an abandoned village in the mountain lands of El Baix Camp (photo: J. T.)

It is our belief that the conceptual classification of toponyms is a methodological resource of great interest in microtoponymy – primarily, for two reasons: first, because only at the *micro* level can we hope to deploy the universal nature of the semantics of the “network of toponyms” of a given space; and, second, because only on the basis of a logical and coherent conceptual classification of toponyms will it be possible to extract all their spatial or geographical information with the necessary scientific rigour (be it by considering the toponyms individually or by adopting a comparative methodology).

For these motives, it is our contention that this is an approach to microtoponymy that cannot be ignored by scholars (even if, in principle, they are only interested in analysing the names from a strictly linguistic or historical perspective). Our study of the microtoponymy of the *comarca* of El Baix Camp, on which we have based this article, is we feel a valid example of this way of proceeding.

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‘Microtoponymy’ as a key for geographical description A case study in Catalonia, Spain

(Summary)

The study of toponyms at the micro-scale – that is, *microtoponymy* – is of great interest for the geographer. Place names, generally speaking, provide us with a rich and diverse source of information about the geographical space (and, moreover, about the *landscape*: a key concept in the study and interpretation of this space). Within this framework, we argue that microtoponyms, considered in terms of their “spatial meaning”, can be, methodologically speaking, an excellent tool for geographers, historians and linguists (as well as other professionals) as they seek to provide a global understanding of the geographical space that we inhabit. Our paper is based on a recently conducted study in the *comarca* or district of Baix Camp, in the province of Tarragona (Catalonia, Spain). In this district, extending over an area of 695 km² and with a population of 192,000 inhabitants (2011), we have undertaken a geographical analysis of a total of 16,400 place names (in the main, microtoponyms). This study has enabled us to interpret the broad relationship between the *comarca*’s names, places and landscapes.

Słowa kluczowe: mikrotoponimia, przestrzeń geograficzna, klasyfikacja toponimów.

Key words: microtoponymy, geographical description, classification of toponyms.