

## LANDSCAPE AND NAMES. THE ROLE OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES IN SPACE AND SPACE-RELATED IDENTITY BUILDING

*Peter JORDAN*<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *The article highlights the role of place names in space and space-related identity building from a cultural-geographical perspective. It is found that place names have important functions mainly in three relations between a cultural group and space, i.e. in reflecting spatial characteristics, in shaping geographical space when they influence it both visually and mentally as well as in identification of people with place and in space-related identity building both of individual members of a cultural group and of a cultural group in total when place names function as labels and support emotional ties between man and place.*

**Key words:** *geographical names, place names, toponyms, space-related identity building, place, cultural geography*

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Related to space, geographical names, toponyms or place names<sup>2</sup> can be attributed three basic functions: they (1) reflect spatial characteristics, (2) contribute to the shaping of space and (3) contribute to identification of people with place. This paper is to highlight these functions in a concise and general manner. It will not differentiate between different kinds of place names like names of natural features, names of cultural regions and landscapes, names of administrative units, settlement names, street names, etc.

Toponymy is an interdisciplinary field of research, in which besides linguists, geographers and cartographers also historians and others are involved. Since the 1960s the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) provides a forum and global framework for many activities in this field (<http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/default.htm>). Geographers and cartographers always played an important role in this Group. They invested many efforts and contributed a lot to the development of scientific methods in rendering geographical names on maps. Geographical aspects of toponymy in the narrower sense, i.e. the role of toponyms in space, were, however, not so much in the focus of interest so far. As one of the very few forerunners in this respect just Walter Sperling has to be mentioned (Sperling 2005, Sperling 2007).

### 2 GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES REFLECT SPATIAL CHARACTERISTICS

Geographical names reflect spatial characteristics, most frequently natural character-

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1 **Peter JORDAN, PhD**, Honorary and Associate Professor, Austrian Academy of Sciences Institute of Urban and Regional Research, Postgasse 7/4/2, A-1010 Wien, e-mail: [peter.jordan@oeaw.ac.at](mailto:peter.jordan@oeaw.ac.at)

2 These terms are used as synonyms. See also Kadmon 2002.

istics, but also settlement history, land use, economic functions, former feudal relations, historical events, etc. When place names reflect natural characteristics, they refer mostly to location, exposition, morphology, waters, vegetation, soil conditions and mineral resources.

Usually characteristics are highlighted, which impressed those who were naming the feature. They may be outstanding and impressive for everybody or at least remarkable from the point of view of the cultural group naming the feature. A farming culture used to have an approach different from, e.g., shepherders. While soil conditions are certainly important for farmers, shepherders may rather be focused on vegetation cover or morphology.

The Slavonic name *Bistrica*, for instance, which occurs not only in areas where currently Slavonic languages are spoken, but appears – mostly in derivations like, e.g., German *Feistritz* – also where a former Slavonic substratum has later been covered by other languages, characterizes a river or brook running quickly and has clear water. *Javornik(y)*, in a German derivation also *Jauernig*, characterizes a specific of the vegetation (*javor*, ‘maple’).

The meaning of many names, however, is not transparent for us. They belong to an older layer of our own language or have been transformed from other languages spoken earlier where the feature is situated. This is true for most names of larger rivers. They have always been important features and were therefore named very early. Later, their names were transferred from one language to another just by morphological adaptation. A case in point is the name *Danube*, which can be traced back at least to Celtic origin, perhaps even to pre-Indo-European languages.

### 3 GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES CONTRIBUTE TO THE SHAPING OF SPACE

Geographical names contribute to the shaping of space both visibly (on signposts in front of settlements – Fig. 1 – , at administrative borders, as road signs) and mentally. Mental shaping means in this context that geographical names structure space and make space-related concepts communicable. This is especially obvious with regions, since regions are clearly mental constructs. There is nothing like a „natural“ region. Where Europe, Central Europe<sup>3</sup>, Moravia [Morava], Moravian Slovakia [Slovácko] or Šariš end, is just the result of a convention. Regions are space-related concepts and mental constructs marked by a name. The name makes it possible to communicate the concept.

It is true, however, that some space-related concepts are supported by “facts” such as administrative boundaries (of communes, provinces, countries), functional relations (catchments, gravitation zones of central places), natural barriers (mountain ranges, rivers, seas). They assume in this way the character of being „real“. But others are indeed pure imaginations, not supported by any “fact” and nothing but mental constructs.

A good example for the latter case is in Slovakia the Spiš region. The concept is based on a historical administrative unit (the Hungarian county Szepes) and on cultural specifics such as a system of autonomous cities and former German settlement. But the region is currently neither an administrative unit nor a functional region in the sense of an area

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3 See Jordan 2005.



**Fig. 1:** Bilingual signpost in eastern Podunajsko

Another classic example is Dalmatia [Dalmacija]. The concepts of this region along the Adriatic Sea shifted during the ages in space and extension. The current concept is based on the extension of the Austrian crownland Dalmatia before World War I, but does neither correspond to any current administrative unit, nor to the functional catchment of a single urban centre. Dalmatia has some natural boundaries (the sea and the mountain range towards Bosnia-Herzegovina [Bosna i Hercegovina]), but is not surrounded by them. The name is in fact the only carrier of this spatial concept.

Nevertheless, the concept is rich in content and well-known not only to inhabitants, but also to foreigners, especially tourists. Mentioning the name lets a lot of associations arise: sun, rocks, rocky coast, a sea with many islands, Venetian-type towns and cities, the wind Bora, etc. The concept of Dalmatia is comprehensive, deeply rooted in public consciousness and used by inhabitants, literature, the media and as a tourism brand. Hotels, restaurants, dishes, ships, newspapers are named after it. Nobody would say that such a region does not exist!

#### **4 GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES CONTRIBUTE TO IDENTIFICATION OF PEOPLE WITH PLACE**

Geographical names contribute to identification of people with place by their label function as well as by supporting emotional ties.

The label function is symbolic. In fulfilling this function names symbolize the identity of a place for inhabitants as well as for the outside world. The label function of place names is similar to flags or coats of arms.

The function of supporting emotional ties refers only to people well acquainted with a certain place, i.e. first of all inhabitants, but also persons who have been socialized at a certain place, have left it later, but have maintained their ties to it; also people, who came into contact with a certain place only later, but were able to develop a strong emotional tie (e.g. frequent vacationers).

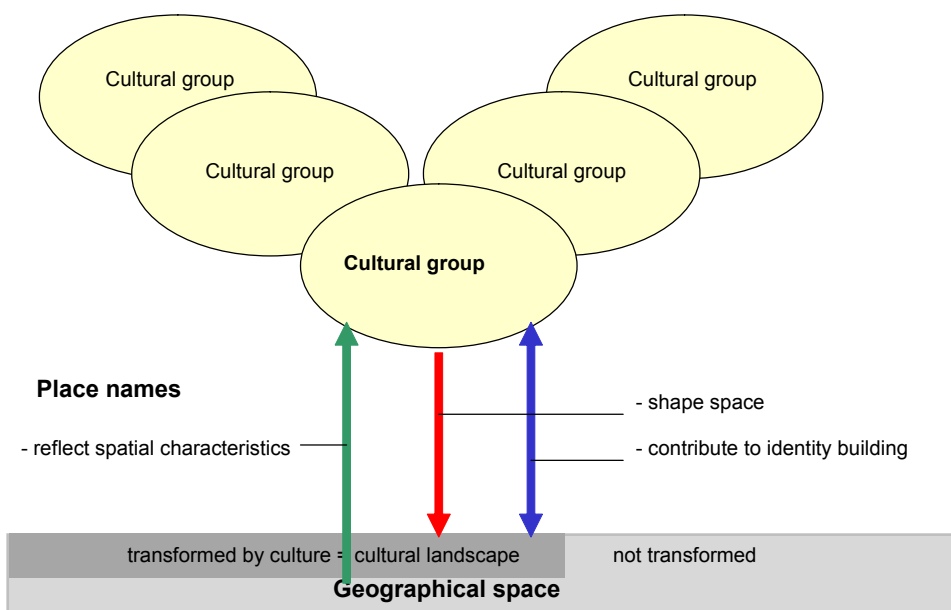
For all of them it is true that if they hear the name, mention it or just memorize it, many associations arise. The set of associations comprises not only imaginations of how the place looks like, how it smells and how it sounds, but also memories of persons and events connected with the place. This “feel of place” has very sensitively been expressed by Yi-Fu Tuan, a prominent disciple of Carl Sauer, the founder of the Berkeley School of Cultural Geography, when he says:

„[Place] is made up of experiences, mostly fleeting and undramatic, repeated day after day and over the span of years. It is a unique blend of sights, sounds, and smells, a unique harmony of natural and artificial rhythms such as times of sunset, of work and play. The feel of a place is registered in one’s muscles and bones.” (Tuan 1977, pp. 183f).

In this way names support emotional ties of people to place, “naming turns space into place” (Watt 2009, p. 21).

## 5 CONCLUSION

In conclusion the scheme in Fig. 2 represents all three functions of geographical names in space and space-related identity building.



**Fig. 2:** Functions of geographical names in space

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## **KRAJINA A MENÁ. ÚLOHA GEOGRAFICKÝCH NÁZVOV V PRIESTORE A BUDOVANIE PRIESTOROVO SÚVISIACEJ IDENTITY**

### *Zhrnutie*

Článok sa zaoberá úlohou miestnych názvov v priestore a budovaním priestorovo súvisiacej identity z kultúrno-geografického hľadiska. Je známe, že miestne názvy majú významné funkcie z hľadiska vzťahov medzi priestorom a kultúrnou skupinou, v reflektovaní priestorových charakteristík, v utváraní geografického priestoru vizuálne a mentálne ako aj v identifikácii ľudí s priestorom a v budovaní priestorovo súvisiacej identity a to jednak individuálnych členov kultúrnej skupiny ako aj kultúrnej skupiny ako celku.

**Recenzovali:** Doc. Mgr. Jaroslav Hofierka, PhD.  
Doc. RNDr. Zdeněk Szczyrba, Ph.D