

**Theses of a PhD dissertation**

**Toponym-Sociological Studies in  
Two Romanian-Hungarian  
Settlements**

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Debrecen, 2020

## **1. The Objectives and Outline of the Dissertation**

Hungarian onomasticians have already pointed out the close relationship between names and the communities using them, as well as name usage and society at several occasions. Names (among them toponyms) are not merely linguistic signifiers, their use and the opinions about them are shaped by a great number of social and psychological factors. I also consider the study of these relationships to be of key significance, thus my research serving as the basis of my dissertation is carried out within a sociological and socio-linguistic framework.

Thus my first and foremost question was which social factors influence toponym awareness and related toponym use. The fieldwork for this study was conducted in the Hungarian parts of the Partium region, primarily Kisbábony in Szatmár County and Szalárd in Bihar County, thus spaces of Hungarian language use in Romania.

In my dissertation I discuss the social determination of toponyms in detail, from the perspectives of toponym awareness, cognitive mapping, and related toponym use. At the same time, although less emphatically, such topics also appear as toponym politics, toponym planning and change, toponym contactology, and toponym attitude.

In the case of studies concerning toponym awareness, we can practically highlight two key perspectives: that of names and that of communities using the names. It is a key issue in the case of toponyms which segment of the

toponym corpus we are talking about, whether the elements of the basic or the peripheral name set. The status of specific toponyms can partly be determined in line with this. From the perspective of name users, the most relevant question is which sociological (e.g., linguistic, ethnic, age, etc.) group of the settlement in question we consider as the basis. Because these may be characterized by a different name corpus and varying name usage traditions.

Studies involving cognitive mapping focus on the knowledge of different groups related to space, their opinions, and the associated toponym usage. In this section the value judgements related to the referents and their denominations occupy a special position. A part of our name usage habits are partly determined by these factors. How people perceive their settlements depends on what they get from their environment. Let it be about the group of children, adults, elderly people or based on another type of categorization, the Hungarian, Romanian or Roma communities. This is also detectable in toponym use. At the same time, toponym use may also be a good tool for these groups to have their environment be seen by others in a certain way.

Although Hungarian language and communities of Hungarian ethnicity have been in the center of research, as part of my toponym awareness and cognitive mapping studies I have tried to involve such respondents also who belonged to other ethnic groups. Research in Kisbábony was extended with the involvement of Hungarian-

speaking Roma respondents, while in Szalárd Romanian-speaking Romanian respondents were involved. In line with this, I have also tried to track the operation of Hungarian toponyms in a partly non-Hungarian environment.

## **2. Outline of Research Methods Applied**

My research included both traditional and innovative methods. Of these, interviews, observations, drawing activities, and content analyses proved to be the most fruitful procedures. The settlements serving as the basis of the studies, i.e., Kisbábony and Szalárd, differ from each other not only in terms of their size, structure and location but also in their population size, composition, and lifestyle; the findings were interpreted in consideration of these factors.

a) The names included in the dissertation are the result of my own toponym collection and they include both contemporary and historical toponyms. I accessed historical toponyms through the analysis of written documents. The majority of these are names on maps (e.g., toponyms from cadastral, military, economic map segments), while a smaller part comes from toponym registries, dictionaries, school documents, etc. The contemporary toponyms were taken from the boundary descriptions and stories of interviewees (20 people from

both Kisbábony and Szalárd) related to their settlements. In this case I did not only record the names and name variants but all other information as well that may be important for the names and the communities using them, e.g., peculiarities of language use, the types of objects denoted by the names, their description, location, the relevant historical information, folk traditions, etc. Finally, I complemented the registries with maps of the inner and outer areas that I made myself.

**b)** The surveys on toponym awareness (based on the already collected contemporary toponyms) took place with the help of questions, half-structured interviews. In this case, after a short introductory discussion I asked specifically about the toponyms of the previously made name compilations. The respondents (102 people in the case of Kisbábony and 90 people in Szalárd) had to answer the yes-no question whether they were aware of the toponyms mentioned by me. In case the answer was yes, in the next step we discussed whether they could tell where the denoted object could be found. In this case I distinguished between those cases when localization also accompanied the toponym, i.e., where toponym awareness was active, and those cases when they had only heard about the toponym, i.e., toponym awareness was passive. In agreement with JÓSZEF ZSOLNAI and other onomasticians, I also believe that the position of toponyms in the basic and peripheral name set greatly depends on the

extent to which the population uses them for localization (1967).

c) In the case of studies involving the cognitive map, I used the method of drawing. In this case the task of respondents was to draw the inner area map of the settlement, indicate the streets, roads, points, and nodes that are important for them (71 respondents participated in this activity from Kisbábony and 55 from Szalárd). With the help of this method, I wished to answer the following questions: which village sections, spaces, pathways, boundaries, points of reference and nodes do the locals have in mind when they think about their village? Do they denote these objects with toponyms? Do the different groups refer to the same objects when using well known toponyms? What kind of social meanings are associated with the toponyms?

Every result is complemented with observations. As during the research I also lived in the settlements studied, I had a lot of opportunities to observe the use of the toponyms and the opinions concerning them also in spontaneous discussions.

### **3. New Scholarly Findings of the Dissertation**

#### *3.1. The nature of name wars*

The examples of the dissertation on name wars indicate how mono- or multilingual name signs may become the focal points of ethnic conflicts. Experience shows that these questions in most cases do not only affect the landscape of the settlements but they also have a strong emotional component (both for the Hungarian and the Romanian population). Behind the different interpretations of law, I tend to recognize a sense of instinctive (and in some cases also conscious) intention to occupy and own an area. If the proper names did not have the above-mentioned social meaning, they would not feed the disputes concerning their use continuously. In this sense it would be an insignificant question how many and what type of names should be displayed in a given settlement. However, for the speaking communities of different ethnicities it is not only the presence of their own name version and the display or lack of display of bi- or multilingual names that is important but the following may also be significant questions: what does the given toponym denote exactly? In case the toponym has some kind of a sublime meaning for the name-giving group, is the object worthy of the name? Is the referent measureable to the greatness of what is included in the name? In line with this, it is not by chance that in Romania it is stipulated by law

that the Hun. *December 1.* ~ Rom. *1 Decembrie*<sup>1</sup> names must denote a main road or main street just as it is also indicative that a group of villages with a mixed ethnicity did not choose official street names for themselves (probably to avoid conflicts).

### *3.2. Toponym contactology in the Hungarian sections of the Partium region*

In the examined settlements of the Partium region, in Bihar and Szatmár Counties, where the proportion of people with a Hungarian ethnicity is still significant but where those speaking Romanian can also be found in an increasing number (due to demographic reproduction, migration, and integration), Hungarian appears in both the transferring and receiving language. In Romania Romanian has to be used in official business. Thus administration mostly takes place in Romanian and with the use of Romanian toponyms. In this area, however, the communication of Hungarians in non-official spaces is characterized by Hungarian-dominant proper name use. Based on the interviews and my observations, I have concluded that the Hungarian and Romanian population of the examined area borrows not only common names but

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<sup>1</sup> 1 December is a national holiday in Romania. On this day Romanians commemorate the National Assembly of 1 December, 1918 and the foundation of Great Romania.



also proper names and within this macro and microtoponyms as well. Simultaneously, linguistic borrowing relies on two types of sources: one of them is oral, the other is written.

The inner area toponymicon used by Hungarians includes several toponyms of Romanian origin as well (e.g. *Diszpenszár* < r. *Dispensar*, *Gosztát* < r. *Gostat*, *Primöria* < r. *Primăria*), however, I have barely met microtoponyms of Romanian origin in the outer areas in their case. This is probably due to the fact that such proper names are not created in this area or only rarely. With the settlement of Romanians in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the already existing Hungarian toponymic corpus did not lose its status significantly. Those whose mother tongue was not Hungarian mostly borrowed and continue to use the toponyms of Hungarian origin referring to objects in the outer area. Romanians learned a part of Hungarian names by means of oral communication. A group of boundary names is known and used by them because the cadastral maps and land register extracts themselves also include these old Hungarian denominations. A part of the official documents come from the so called “Hungarian times”, from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. No newer surveys have been made of this area by Romanian officials, thus the “Romanianization” of the official toponymic corpus has not happened here yet.

### 3.3. *Toponym attitude as the driving force behind toponym use*

I did not complete a separate study to explore toponym attitudes. During toponym collection and toponym awareness surveys, however, it happened several times that the recording of a toponym or questions about specific toponyms were difficult temporarily because there was some kind of an underlying linguistic attitude in the background. In the methodological section of my dissertation I partly introduce these attitudes.

The majority of the interviews supported my assumption that there is also an ideal toponymicon in the minds of respondents (besides the one used by them) that is independent of the speakers. The name users have such toponyms that they like to use in front of certain people (e.g., a researcher collecting toponyms), these, as they claim, are so called “true toponyms”; and there are also some that they would rather hide, obviously these are the so called “untrue toponyms”. Preconceptions are closely associated with particular places and toponyms. As a result, it is important for them what kind of names/name variants they prefer in different situations and in the presence of certain speaking partners.

According to the respondents the true toponyms are beautiful and old. The untrue toponyms are ugly (thus they contain some kind of a stigmatized/obscene expression, e.g. *Cigánysor*, *Cigánytempom*) and/or new, i.e., they have

become known recently (e.g. *Hungaroring, Rogériusz*). Discussions about toponyms have revealed that the respondents use the expressions of the latter group in the sense of toponyms, in the role of toponyms, however, based on their answers given to direct questions, they do not list them among toponyms.

### *3.4. Toponym awareness*

In the two settlements, I primarily examined four variables influencing the awareness and use of toponyms and the changes in the base and peripheral toponym corpus. These are the following: age, gender, occupation (and closely related mobility) and I also touched upon the question how based on the number of years spent in the settlement the indices showing name awareness decrease or increase. Finally, and also related to the question, I also provided a characterization of the toponym awareness and toponym use of different social groups.

#### *3.4.1. Toponym awareness and age*

My studies of toponym awareness have confirmed that the toponymicon expands with age. Our knowledge of the direct environment becomes more subtle, precise with the expansion of the individual's living space. This, of course, also presupposes that the mental toponym lexicon also grows from day to day as thinking and talking about places

is most convenient by means of using their proper names. The spectacular expansion of the toponym lexicon, however, is visible only up to a certain age. It varies individually when someone reaches a stage when they study new toponyms only rarely from their direct environment and the name set of their native village. In the case of Hungarians in Kisbábony, for example, it is true for those under 30 that younger people know fewer toponyms than those older than them. In the case of Hungarians in Szalárd, this is somewhere between 35 and 40 years of age. Those who knew the toponyms best were over 50 in both settlements. Among the members of the older generation, however, there were also many who had poor or average toponym awareness. We can thus state that at the borderline of young adulthood and middle age, the age becomes less important and other factors influencing toponym awareness gain ground.

In terms of the relationship between toponym use and age, it seems to be generally true that children, teenagers, young adults, middle-aged people, and the elderly each have a different toponymicon. This is not only a quantitative but also a typological difference. There are differences between age groups not only in the knowledge of names but also in name usage and name giving. In the case of small children, for example, the world of tales and fantasy are just as central as the historical context of toponyms. At the same time, with regard to the interpretation of toponyms, a degree of under-

generalization can definitely be seen also. For example, they use the name of a settlement not for the entire settlement but only a small part of it, mostly with reference to their own street or house. Based on my observations, there is some openness among teenagers and young adults towards innovation and linguistic creativity. For example, they prefer attaching the *city* formant to settlement names: *Bábonycity*, *Szalárdcity*. They add some kind of an iconic style to the names of settlements with this second constituent. With the English *city* name component they indicate that the named settlements (villages in the examples) have a poor infrastructure, they are far from having a city-like appearance and atmosphere. The majority of middle-aged and elderly residents of smaller settlements are aware of and use quite a lot of microtoponyms connected to the settlement (e.g. *Alsó-Igényelt*, *Felső-Igényelt*, *Belső-Benés-láz*, *Külső-Benés-láz*). This, however, is less and less typical with the spreading of large-scale agriculture and the end of traditional village lifestyle.

### 3.4.2. *Toponym awareness and gender*

For a long time, scholarly studies argued that men know toponyms much better than women (INCZEFI 1964: 150). My survey in Kisbábony and Szalárd more or less confirmed this opinion. On average, women knew fewer toponyms in almost all age groups than men. There was, however, no

significant difference between the values seen (either in the Kisbábony or in the Szalárd survey). At the same time, in the case of some age groups the respondents who knew the most toponyms were women. In cases when we can really create a ranking it is mostly due to the division of labor and social differences. Among both male and female respondents we can find well-informed and less well-informed name users. This almost always depends on what “someone gets from the environment”, what kind of tasks people perform in their daily life. In the case of Kisbábony and Szalárd also, we can claim that raising the children is the task of women in most of the families. With the birth of children, women spend more time at home, while men working in the fields work in the outskirts as well. A group of men may know more toponyms because they have more physical experience in connection with the place of residence and its environs.

### *3.4.3. Toponym awareness and occupation*

During the surveys, numerous respondents have confirmed the assumption according to which those working in agriculture have a broader knowledge of places and toponyms than their peers not working in this field of occupation. At the same time, in the case of Kisbábony, it has also been confirmed that other activities besides agriculture and the greater mobility between settlements have a negative impact on the acquisition of toponyms of

the close environment. The people who know places and place names the best are farmers, foresters, surveyors and those who often visit the outskirts due to their hobbies. As opposed to this, those who never visit this area have acquired knowledge only about the inner area and its toponyms.

#### *3.4.4. Toponym awareness of different social groups*

In my dissertation I also provided a characterization of the toponym awareness and toponym use of different social, ethnic-linguistic and denominational groups. I regard this section (in the absence of similar Hungarian research) as a novel approach as well as an experimental study. I compared the toponym knowledge of Hungarians with those of the Roma population in Kisbábony and with that of Romanians in Szalárd. The data from Kisbábony indicated that the local Roma population was aware of much fewer toponyms than the Hungarians of Kisbábony due to their lifestyle. As opposed to this, the toponym awareness of the two ethnic groups in Szalárd was similar. I explained this result with the similar lifestyle of the two groups, Hungarians and Romanians.

#### *3.4.5. Familiarity with toponyms*

We can find only few microtoponyms among the toponyms of the two settlements that would be known and

used by everyone without exception. The familiarity with names, however, depends not on linguistic but rather on extra-linguistic factors primarily: functionality is the key. The name users study toponyms particularly to be able to talk about the objects denoted by them. For example, in Kisbábony the *Cselősz* toponym is known by the entire Hungarian population because the area is perfectly suitable for growing strawberries, and at the same time it is of a large area with almost all families owning land there. Practically, the entire Hungarian population goes to work there. Still, the word itself does not mean anything to them. They cannot provide any information either of its origin or original meaning.

### *3.5. Cognitive mapping and name use*

Recently socio-onomastic research has also addressed the question of spatial mapping. We can find numerous points of contact between works on toponym sociology and cognitive mapping. Cognitive mapping is such an abstraction that includes those cognitive abilities with the help of which we perceive, select, collect, arrange, and store information about the space around us (DOWNS–STEA 2005: 598). This knowledge, however, is present in our minds not as a map but in the form of mental content. Thus in the form of knowledge, misconceptions, desires, and real data (CSÉFALVAY 1990: 17). When we deal with cognitive mapping, we collect information regarding a given space,



and we do so in a way that at the same time we examine the environment making up the basis of the research from the perspective of the individual and the group, through their internal world. We study this with the help of interviews, discussion, as well as the drawing of mental, subjective maps.

Based on the Kisbábony survey, we may claim that in this settlement the members of the Hungarian-Reformed community do not see the village the same way as the members of the Roma-Roman Catholic community. When representing the settlement, the Hungarians highlighted the areas inhabited by Hungarians, while the Roma population did so mostly with the areas inhabited by the Roma. The two groups indicated the boundaries of the settlement parts elsewhere and segmented the village differently. This was also perceptible in their use of toponyms. Similar results were found in the case of Szalárd. The Hungarians elaborated the areas inhabited by Hungarians in more detail and highlighted the toponyms of these areas in their stories.

Summarizing the relationship between toponym use and denominations, as well as individuals from different social groups, we may claim that similarly to children, the toponym use of adult respondents is also characterized by a degree of under generalization. In their case, however, this type of thinking is mostly due to social differences. In the minds of the local populace, the settlements and settlement parts are never of the same size as they would be administratively. The different communities living in a

settlement do not see their environment the same way, in some cases they position the different division lines and boundaries completely elsewhere in their mind. Drawing boundaries with the help of toponyms often involves a degree of distancing from the other sociological groups of the settlement.

#### **4. Further opportunities for research**

In the future it would be worth examining the issue of toponym awareness and use among the Roma in Kisbábony and Romanians in Szalárd with the involvement of other tools and methods. The toponym awareness and cognitive mapping of the native Hungarian Roma in Kisbábony could be studied again within the framework of a follow-up study. Recently some Roma families started buying land while others started working abroad while also keeping their homes in Kisbábony. In their case, ten or more years later, I would examine how the changed lifestyle and living conditions may influence language and toponym use. I studied the toponym awareness of Romanian respondents mostly from the perspective of Hungarian toponyms, in a Hungarian framework. This aspect of the research served as a complement to the study conducted with Hungarians. I think that with a change of perspectives, a separate study could be conducted in this respect in their native language and by focusing on the Romanian toponyms.

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Registry number: DEENK/39/2020.PL  
Subject: PhD Publikációs Lista

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### List of publications related to the dissertation

#### Hungarian book chapters (1)

1. **Varga, Z.:** Hegyközsátár élőnyelvi és történeti helynevei.  
In: Partium : Társadalom, tradíció, erőforrások / szerk Szilágyi Ferenc, [s.n.], Nagyvárad,  
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### List of other publications

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*Acta Universitatis Christianae Partiensis.* 1, 75-80, 2019. ISSN: 2668-3067.

The Candidate's publication data submitted to the iDEa Tudóstér have been validated by DEENK on the basis of the Journal Citation Report (Impact Factor) database.

20 February, 2020

