

# METHODS AND TECHNIQUES OF URBAN TOPONYMIC ANALYSIS AND THEIR APPLICATION IN THE CITY OF TOLEDO

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## I. TOPONYMY IN GEOGRAPHICAL ANALYSIS

For geographers, the importance of toponymy is threefold (Rodríguez, 2012). First, toponyms are the key spatial reference indicators for the general public. Second, place names are an essential factor in the conservation and dissemination of geographical information. Finally, toponyms contain information on the place that they designate: this information can refer to their context, origin and evolution. This makes toponyms items of immaterial heritage (UNGEEN, 2011) and enhances their role in geographical analysis (Riesco, 2010); place names can be highly informative tools (Tort, 1999) both because of their linguistic characteristics and the information they provide about the place to which they relate (Rodríguez and Vázquez, 2013).

The use of toponyms as a territorial information tool is one of the main challenges faced by the geographical science. The last decade has witnessed the emergence of a new field of research that adopts a *metasemantic* approach to toponymy. This perspective focuses on toponyms not as mere names or labels, but as social signs or symbols within a geographical framework. Toponyms, as geographical tools used to designate places which are prominent in the collective imaginary (Woodman, 2012: 111), have different *layers* of meaning that go beyond the words (Radding and Western, 2010), conveying information about the place's territorial setting. This information can refer, for instance, to the relevance of a place to a given social group (Lucas and Ordinas, 2013), which is reflected in how widespread the knowledge of the toponym is or how often it is used, or reflect a given tourism-management policy (Light, 2014), which becomes manifest in the toponyms used to give directions in urban historical quarters.

Recent research trends, such as *critical toponymies* (Berg and Vuolteenaho, 2009), provide a new interpretation of toponymy from a symbolic perspective: as a factor of *territorial power* that is capable of interacting with the landscape and influencing it. In terms of geographical analysis, this means analyzing toponyms as exclusive and independent territorial elements that have unique characteristics; the individual and exhaustive study of each place name (Martínez de Pisón, 2010: 25), must be combined with the collective analysis of all related toponyms and the examination of their meaning for both the individual and different social groups. The study of place names thus becomes a prop for a critical territorial analysis, especially in cities, where the imprint left by the population on the territory and its toponyms is especially significant and the understanding of place names is particularly informative for an integrated examination of the urban territory.

In short, toponymy and the meanings therein are a powerful geographical information tool. Traditional qualitative methodologies used for the compilation and analysis of toponymic information are in need of deep methodological and theoretical revision if they are to be of use for the new critical approach to the geographical analysis of toponyms. In this regard, this paper presents several tested procedures and fieldwork techniques, including field observation, urban *derives*, mental maps and survey, which have been incorporated to toponymic analysis only recently, but which are already proving to be of great use in the collection of toponymic information.

## II. TECHNIQUES FOR URBAN TOPONYMIC ANALYSIS

Field observation, urban *derives*, mental maps and survey are common techniques in the field of territorial analysis, and can also be of great use in the study of toponyms. It is, therefore, interesting to point out ways in which these techniques can be implemented in order to detect and analyze the geographical information contained within toponyms.

In the context of urban toponymy, **field observation** can be defined as analytical observations aimed at the collection of information about the most relevant aspects of the toponymy of the place under examination: the kind of toponymic signals present, the relationship between the meaning of the place name and the reality of the place, the sensations generated by the toponym on the ground, etc. In this way, field observation can be used to detect the features of the urban context that surrounds the toponym. With the *in situ* visualization of the name, part of the metasemantic information of the toponym can be identified and evaluated: for example, that concerning the relationship of the place name and the place it designates – a relationship that cannot be approached in any other way. The way the toponym is situated within the collective imaginary, or the veracity of the meaning of a place name with regard to its environment, can also be investigated in this manner.

**Urban derives** are spontaneous and undirected urban itineraries (Martínez-Arrarás et al., 2013). The random nature of the itineraries is part of the experiential component of the action. This technique, which is aimed at the compilation and analysis of geographical information, allows for the perception of the city's reflexive imaginary – that is, the unfiltered impressions developed by the observer on the ground. During a *derive*, “the walker is porous and active at the same time, [and] everything that he or she observes has a creative projection upon the world” (López, 2014), which allows for the construction of a narrative sequence of

the city. Generally, this narration takes the shape of a memory of the itinerary, a set of free perceptions that can be used to analyze the city. In the case of toponymy, memories of *derives* are accounts of urban experience, in which place names become the connection between place and narration. It is, it follows, of capital importance to know what names are used or omitted from the resulting written accounts, the way they are used and the imprint that they leave on the discourse. Within the framework of the memory of a *derive*, mentioning a toponym is equivalent to visiting a place during the itinerary, bringing it to the fore, valorizing it (Méndez, 2012). Toponymic analysis of memory helps us to understand how places are perceived and how important they are for the observer.

**Mental maps** are sketches of the individual perception of space elaborated by an observer, either in a totally undirected way or following a series of pre-established premises. Mental maps are used for the collection of information on the way individuals understand and perceive places and territorial features in general. Mental maps can be defined as ‘instruments with which to understand the individual perception of the environment, ways to examine mental spatial models’ (Lucas and Ordinas, 2013). Among other goals, the study of mental maps aims to identify places with a symbolic charge, that is, places which are on some level meaningful to a certain social group. As a toponymic technique, mental maps clarify the informant’s perception or response to a given geographical name in a specific setting. These responses are reflected in the toponymic information that the subject includes in a sketch and in the way each item is marked. The place names used and omitted, either deliberately or accidentally, reflect the relationship of the subject with the place and/or the place name. Mental maps, therefore, are a graphic representation of the ideas and perceptions that the individual has about place names and the places themselves.

Finally, **surveys** are a traditional technique used for the compilation and analysis of toponymic information. Within the framework of critical toponymy and the study of place names as symbols, surveys allow for the interrogation of individuals concerning the toponym, the way it works and the place it occupies in the collective imaginary. They are a tool with which to understand the context and *implications* of toponyms. Asking a subject how he or she uses the toponym, or what the toponym means for them, is useful for the analysis of place names and the images generated around them.

### III. INTEGRATED ANALYSIS OF URBAN TOPONYMY: THE *PARQUE DE NARA*, TOLEDO

The methods and techniques proposed for the analysis of urban toponyms can be used in combination in order to attain as much information as possible on the geographical information contained within toponyms. The case study chosen to illustrate this is the Spanish city of Toledo, a tourist destination close to the metropolitan area of Madrid. The toponymy of Toledo is of great interest both because of the diversity of meanings and the historical heterogeneity of its toponyms. The analysis of the toponymy of Toledo has been carried out through a number of field observations, surveys, mental maps and urban *derives*.

As an example of the integrated use of these techniques for the study of a toponym, we shall refer to the toponym *Parque de Nara*. The *Parque de Nara* is an urban park located in the district of Buenavista, in the northern *ensanche* (an area developed during one of

the periods of rapid urban expansion of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries) of Toledo; specifically, the park is located in the oldest sector of the district, which is one of the most recent urban districts of the city. Its construction, which is still ongoing, began in the 1970s. The park is linear in plan, and it is approximately 500 m long and 80 m wide. Unlike other parks in the city, it is not surrounded by its own fence, but by the walls of city blocks, each of which have a private entrance to the park. Therefore, although public, the park almost operates as a private garden for these city blocks – something which is reflected in both the surveys and the mental maps. The park is only spontaneously mentioned or drawn by the residents of those city blocks.

The analysis of the toponym confirms, first, that the park is a reference for the residents of Buenavista. The name of the park is better known to the residents than other infrastructures and public facilities in the neighborhood. The name *Nara*, which is very different to the denomination of other streets, squares and parks in the district (most of which are named after European capitals), make it stand out. Survey answers suggest that the denomination of the nearby *Parque de Bélgica*, which is more accessible and visible to the residents owing to its location in a major thoroughfare and the presence of a large billboard in the main entrance, is less well known. The significant level of recognition of the toponym *Parque de Nara* is illustrative of the transcendence that a distinct denomination can have for the collective imaginary in newly constructed urban districts.

Second, as indicated by the surveys and the other evidence, the term *Nara* symbolically connects the park with the Japanese city of Nara, which is the sister city of Toledo. In fact, the interior of the park is decorated by a series of Japanese-inspired sculptures, which reinforces the symbolic value of the toponym and the testimony of the sisterhood between the cities and also stresses that the neighborhood belongs to the city.

Third, the example posed by the *Parque de Nara* also illustrates the fact that toponyms are powerful symbols of identity. During field observation, the existence of different local associations which include the word *Nara* in their name has been attested, including the *Asociación de Vecinos Parque Nara* (*Association of residents Parque Nara*). This reinforces the idea of the park as an iconic place for the nearby residents.

On the other hand, fieldwork and the textual accounts resulting from the urban *derives* have confirmed the role played by the toponym *Parque de Nara* as a reference not only in terms of identity, but also in a functional capacity, as the park has become the key meeting point in the area. The memories confirm what the *in situ* analysis suggests, as pointed out by the subjects:

- ‘The park divides the housing states in Ronda de Buenavista; it is more a green street than a park.’
- ‘It is a meeting point for the youth of the area.’
- ‘The park is well known and is full of life and people of all ages.’

Finally, a toponym such as *Parque de Nara* in an urban district that is still growing can not only have identity implications, but also play a practical role. In this regard, the reference to *Nara* can function as a touristic and commercial attraction, in an area which is essentially residential in nature. This is, for instance, illustrated by the following news

story: 'Toledo will build a great Japanese garden in the Parque de Nara as a symbol of the sisterhood of both cities; this is part of the Council's tourist strategy, which is to promote the city in the Japanese market.'<sup>1</sup> The toponym *Parque de Nara* can, therefore, be used as an excuse for the touristic promotion of a district that, otherwise, has little to attract visitors.

The study of the toponym *Parque de Nara* using the techniques presented earlier reveals aspects of the toponym which are not visible at first glance:

- The toponym *Parque de Nara* stands as a testimony to the origin and evolution of the urban district where it is located. The introduction and survival of this toponym, which is very different from others in the district, is the result of a set of circumstances that, likewise, are very different from those currently in place. The park was built in the 1970s, when the city embarked on a policy aimed at enhancing its international image, which included the city undertaking sister-city agreements with a number of other cities worldwide, including Nara. The construction of the park also marks the end of a policy of concentrated urban planning and the beginning of new, expansive urban planning policies, which are characteristic of the 1980s. This new model left its imprint on the district's toponyms, nearly all of which make reference to European countries (*Calle de Alemania*, *Avenida de Francia*, etc.); this is a feature characteristic of urban districts developed as a single urban unit, where often all toponyms are related.
- The *Parque de Nara* is one of the symbols of the area. The fact that it stands out among other toponyms in the district and its presence in other local denominations (e.g., the name of the residents' association), make it a reference point for the inhabitants of the area from a spatial and an identity point of view.
- The toponym (and the place) are semi-private. The *Parque de Nara* refers to a space that some residents refer to as publicly owned, while others hardly mention it at all because they conceive of it as a private space. This point is directly associated with the transformation of urban forms and the lifestyle associated with closed-block urban planning.
- The toponym is facilitating the generation of a touristic destination. Although the district is on the periphery of the city and has nothing to attract the tourist, the connection created by the *Parque de Nara* between the district of Buenavista and the Japanese city becomes an excuse to present the neighborhood as an attractive destination for Japanese tourists.

Our analysis of *Parque de Nara* has presented different aspects of this place, which can only be revealed by the application of our critical methodologies. The combination of toponymic techniques has led, in this case, to the deciphering of information that was previously *codified* in the toponym and to the proposal, confirmation or rejection of hypothesis about the park and the district of Buenavista in general.

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#### **IV. CONCLUSIONS**

The information contained within toponyms, as linguistic signs, is of great interest for geographical analysis. The methods and techniques presented for their compilation and study need to be framed by the conceptual and epistemological changes undergone by urban toponymic analysis in recent times. In this regard, these research tools can be used to extract information from the toponym and can lead to a different interpretation of the city. Current and historical maps, printed works and documents are essential for the interpretation of toponyms, but combining them with field observations, surveys and other toponymic techniques can result in a much more complete, or even new, explication of the city.

Each toponym is unique, and the results of its geographical analysis, be it in isolation or as a set of toponyms, will also be so. Therefore, only by approaching their study from a multimethod and integrated perspective can we hope to grasp the spectrum of information contained within toponyms. Because of the unique nature of this information, toponymy is in need of constant revision, and also of protection, as a source of geographical information and a form of immaterial heritage.