Place names as 'condensed narratives' about the geographical feature denoted and the name-giving community

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1. Introduction

Place names can be regarded as 'condensed narratives' in two directions: about the geographical feature they denote and about the name-giving community. In the direction of the feature this is, however, only true for descriptive names, not for commemorative names like names after persons or events or for neutral names like names after flowers or birds.

Attributing place names the function of 'condensed narratives' is based on the assumption that every name has been given intentionally, i.e. with the intention to highlight an essential or striking aspect of the feature, although we are rarely conscious of their meaning, when we use place names in our daily life, and a name's meaning is not always transparent for us today, since some place names are very old, originate in former languages or older stages of a language spoken in place and have been adapted to the current language of the place morphologically and phonetically.

From a cultural-geographical perspective the stories place names tell us about features and the name-giving community are interesting, since they convey an impression of how people perceived their environment, what was important for them, and which were their cultural, economic and political views and attitudes. Thus, place names serve as keys to cultural history, to the perception of space by already extinct societies so important for understanding the current cultural landscape, which is always composed of several cultural-temporal layers. Farmers had perceptions and interests different from herdsmen, seafarers and coastal dwellers different from people residing in the hinterland. They are all deducible from place names, if these are analysed carefully on the background of geographical and historical knowledge.

The terms 'narratives' or 'stories' are in this context of course only meant in a figurative sense, since names are only individual words that first require detailed interpretation, which again requires a lot of additional knowledge. The 'narrative' told by a place name is thus indeed very condensed. It needs to be unfolded by the researcher.

This article focuses on this very geographical aspect of place names with the intention of explaining in a journal with an audience of mainly non-geogra-

phers, why this aspect is so important for geographers and triggers geographical research into place names in recent times.[1] This is due to the fact that the constructivist approach, i.e., to focus on human perception of geographical space and geographical features, to look at them as human constructs rather than as reality, has become an important, even the prevailing paradigm in this science (Weichhart 2018). In the context of this approach, place names can be regarded as indicators of how people perceive and construct their spatial environment.[2] Geographical approaches to toponymy are – this has to be admitted – not so different from socio-linguistic. They just put a stronger emphasis on space.

To embed this specific topic into a wider theoretical framework and a wider scope of geographical aspects of place names, the article starts nevertheless with an overview of the basic roles of place names in relating people to geographical space.

2. Four basic roles of place names in relating people to geographical space

The four basic roles place names (can) play in relating humankind to territory (or human communities to geographical space) have been derived from the seminal works of Yi-Fu Tuan (1977, 1990 [1974], 1991), Keith Basso (1988, 1996) and Don Mitchell (2000) by the author and extensively presented for the first time in 2012 (Jordan 2012a, b) as well as further elaborated in various contexts later (e. g., Jordan 2016a, 2019).

(1)   Place names often highlight characteristics of space important for a
      certain community and reflect in this way a human community's
      perception of space.

This is the role on which this article focuses, and it will be further explained in the following subchapters.

(2)   Place names mark the territory of a community.

Place names with the status of endonyms (as names given and/or applied by the local community) are markers of the community's own territory. This role

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1   This article could thus also be titled "Why geographers are interested in place names".

2   As already demonstrated by Inge Bily 1999 or Stephen Jett 1997 to mention some pioneers in this field. (Inge Bily proceeds in this work like a geographer, although she is linguist.)

is exerted by the display of place names in public space, e. g., by town signs or plates, or in documents and publications, e. g., on maps. Their function is similar to flags, coats of arms, labels or logos. This role gives names in general, but place names in particular, always and inevitably a political, sociological and juridical dimension and makes them a potential source of conflict (see Horn 2004; Eller et al. 2008).

Place names mark the territories of all levels and scales of human communities. Even our workplace is usually marked by a name. It is the name of a person, which in this function assumes the status of a place name indicating that this is the room where this individual has more rights (and responsibilities) than others. At the next level of human communities, a town sign marks a populated place. When the town sign is bi- or multilingual, it communicates that not just one community, but two or more reside there and share the identity of the place (see Jordan 2014). This only works without conflict when the dominant community is ready to accept sharing the identity of the place – which is not always the case.

(3)   Place names structure space mentally.

Place names help to subdivide complex spatial reality into features. Every geographical feature (in the sense of a subunit of geographical space) is a mental construct. This is especially obvious with landscapes, cultural regions or macroregions lacking concrete or clear limits like current administrative boundaries, 'natural boundaries' like mountain ranges or rivers. Up to where Europe extends in the East is obviously just a convention. It is also impossible to find clear boundaries of Central or Southeast Europe in reality. A place name is the vehicle, the instrument in this process of mental structuring of space. Without place names we would not be able to establish a system of space-related concepts, to communicate it, to maintain it. In many cases (e. g., cultural regions, landscapes) the place name is in fact the only identifier of a geographical feature (see Jordan 2017).

(4)   Place names support emotional ties between people and place and
       promote in this way space-related identity building.

If somebody acquainted with a place reads, mentions or memorizes a place name, this recalls all the contents of a space-related concept for him/her, reminds her/him of sights, persons, events, smells, sounds associated with this place and lets "the feel of a place" arise as Yi-Fu Tuan calls it (Tuan 1977).

Therefore, it is, e. g., important to render minority place names on town signs (Jordan 2014). They give these communities the feeling of belonging, of being at home there. It is also a kind of an affirmative action, since non-dominant groups are in special need of being affirmed. For them group identity (including space-related identity as a prominent part of it) means a daily challenge – much more than for a dominant group.

How important place names are for space-related identity and emotional ties can also be seen from emigrants, who frequently take the name of their home with them – as a last tie to their former home or to make the new place more familiar. *Nieuw Amsterdam,* the earlier Dutch name for New York is a prominent example.

3. Place names by onymisation

One category of place names escapes the quality of condensed narratives (with a small caveat mentioned at the end of this subchapter), although they are descriptive: the category of place names evolving through onymisation. Very frequently a current place name is just the result of onymisation in the sense of a generic for river, mountain or hill, which has after some time assumed the quality of a proper name for this specific feature, not for the feature category in general.[3] The driver in this process is language change, e. g., by orthographic reform applied to 'normal' words of the language, but not to names; the substitution of an old word by a new one leaving the older one behind as proper name; or by the spread of a new language, whereby the words for places of the former language are transferred to the new language slightly adapted or unchanged as proper names. Place names of this kind are not really highlighting a specific of a feature as perceived by the name-giving community. They just attribute it to a feature category without describing its characteristics.

Cases in point are many names of larger rivers in Europe. They are of Celtic (or pre-Celtic) origin like *Donau* (Danube) that can be derived from Indo-European $*déh_2nu$- 'river' (such as *Don, Dniester* [Nistru]) (Bichlmeier 2015: 6, Greule 2014: 100, Pohl/Schwaner 2007: 183); or *Drau/Drava* from Indo-European $*dra\underline{u}as$ (< $*dro\underline{u}os$) 'river course' (Greule 2014: 102, Anreiter 2005: 45). Thus, the generic for river has by language change assumed the character of a

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3   The ICOS List of Key Onomastic Terms defines onymisation as "transfer of a linguistic unit (including common nouns, adjectives, verbs, interjections, phrases etc.) to the class of proper names" (ICOS 2021: 4)

proper name. It could have been attributed to any other river and does not tell anything specifically about the river in question.

Inn from Indo-European *penios meaning approximately 'muddy river' (Anreiter 2005: 36 f., Bichlmeier 2009: 32 f.), however, may already be regarded as describing a specific of this river; as well as *Enns* from Indo-European **pen-* 'swamp' (Bichlmeier 2009: 32, for a different etymon but with similar meaning see Greule 2014: 129), although the characteristics of being muddy or swampy did and does certainly not apply to all their sections.

Also some mountain names result from onymisation. An example is *Tauern*, derived from pre-Roman **taur-* 'mountain, pass' (Pohl 2011: 17, *Pohl/Schwaner* 2007: 218). In contrast, the name *Karawanken/Karavanke* from pre-Celtic **kar-* 'rock, stone' (Pohl/Schwaner 2007: 212) describes a specific of this mountain range that exposes striking rock faces especially to the North (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Northern rock faces of the Koschuta/Košuta in the central part of the Karawanken/Karavanke (Photo by Peter Jordan 2017)

The small caveat announced before refers to the possibility that if, e. g., a river is just named *river* this could also be understood as regarding this river as 'the

river', the river par excellence, the prototype of rivers, i.e., elevating it due to its size or other qualities above other rivers. This is comparable to naming the city of Santiago in Chile just *Santiago* without any specifying addition.[4] It is conceived as 'the Santiago', while all the other Santiagos throughout the Spanish-speaking sphere have to explain what makes them different from the largest, while not oldest city with this name. Thus, also place names generated by onymisation have a certain potential to tell stories.

4. Place names as condensed narratives about the geographical feature

In addition to the examples of *Inn*, *Enns*, and *Karawanken/Karavanke* the river name *Gail* derived from Indo-European $*g^ho\underset{\textstyle .}{i}lo$- 'the frothing' (ibidem: 185; Pohl 2020: 67) is specifically describing a striking characteristic of this river that obviously impressed and was important for the name-givers. It is the tendency of this river in southwestern Carinthia (Austria) to flood in spring and autumn due to heavy rain in its catchment caused by moist air proceeding northward from the Adriatic Sea and the slight gradient of the wide bottom of its glacial valley. This remained a characteristic of this river up to the present day, although the effects of flooding have since been mitigated by regulation measures, while inundations were earlier a severe obstacle to settlement and agriculture at the wide valley bottom and almost all traditional villages and hamlets are located on river terraces, gravel fans or glacial moraines (see Fig. 2).

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4   *Santiago de Chile*, frequently referred to as the full endonym version, has no official status.

Fig. 2: River Gail, domesticated by dams in its wide valley bottom
(Photo by Peter Jordan 2021)

Another example for highlighting a striking aspect of a geographical feature is *Reifnitz*, the German name of a village at the southern banks of Lake Woerth [Wörthersee] also in Carinthia (see Fig. 3). This village name has been derived from a little river (rather a brook) running into the lake there. Both names are linguistically derived from Slavic *Ribnica*, which means 'fish brook' (Pohl 2020: 173). It has to be mentioned that this area had a Slavic population before it was colonized by Bavarian German-speakers. The latter assumed the name they found and adapted it to their own language. Naming it 'fish brook' had obviously been motivated by the fact that fish (chars) use to go up this brook for spawning. It is the brook along the lake where this phenomenon is the most impressive up to the present day.

Fig. 3: Central section of Lake Woerth [Wörthersee] in Carinthia with Reifnitz
(lower bottom of the map section) and one of the islands (left fringe of the map section)
(Source: Bundesamt für Eich- und Vermessungswesen 2021)

The name *Lake Woerth [Wörthersee]* itself is a very descriptive name, since it means 'lake of the islands' (Pohl/Schwaner 2007). Indeed, it has some islands, more than any other lake in the Carinthian lake district. *Woerth*, to explain it linguistically, is an older German word for island, which would today be *Insel*. It corresponds to *Werder* or *Werd* in northern Germany. So, we see here again the attempt of the name-givers to highlight a specific of the place, which looked most important for them.

Šotovento is the name of the southwestern region of the Croatian Adriatic island of Krk, where Venetian and later Italian were important languages for centuries and are still spoken by a minority (see Fig. 4). The name has been transformed into Croatian from the Italian words *sotto vento* 'below the wind'. They are describing the most important fact that this region is due to its relief not as exposed to the local wind bora [bura], which otherwise affects most of the Croatian islands (and also the mainland coast) and has – due to its force – a significant impact on settlement, vegetation, land use and navigation. It is today no less important due to its impact on tourism as the main economic sector on the islands since the 1960s: A bora period of some days in the later summer season can cause the sudden exodus of tourists resulting in a major loss of revenues.

The fact of a region protected from this wind obviously made a direct impression on the name-givers, because it let a vegetation different from other parts of the same island develop and also favoured settlement and agriculture. The importance of highlighting it has also by no means declined ever since.
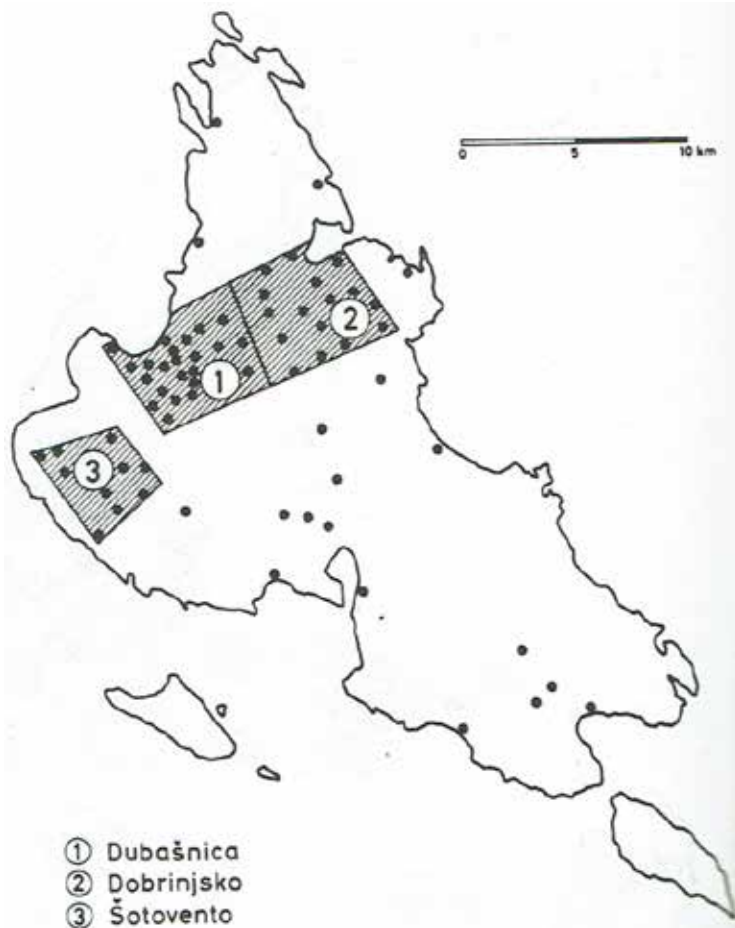

① Dubašnica
② Dobrinjsko
③ Šotovento

Fig. 4: The Croatian island Krk with three regions of higher settlement density
(dots indicate populated places), one of them being Šotovento
(Source: Novosel-Žic 1987: 94)

5. Place names as condensed narratives about the name-giving community

Already the examples cited above are not only narratives about the feature but can also tell us something about the community of name-givers, their perception of features and the physical environment in general; and the perspective of interpretation can – in contrast to item 4 – be focused in this direction. But there exist also non-descriptive place-name categories like hagionyms and commemorative names that are almost exclusively condensed narratives about the name-giving community. This perspective is to be deepened by the following examples.

The community-directed perspective of descriptive place names is exemplified by Walter Sperling, when he tried to find out differences in naming motives and naming practices between Slavs and Germans in the Bohemian lands Bohemia [Čechy], Moravia [Morava] and Silesia [Slezsko] (Sperling 2008). The Bohemian lands are a perfect arena for this kind of investigations, because they were after their Slavic settlement from the 6th century onward also settled by Germans from the 12th century onward – certainly at their fringes, in an insular way also in their interior. This let Sperling ask the questions: Whose naming practices reflect trees and forest more – the Slavic or the German? Have the Germans adopted the Slavic names reflecting trees and forest or did they create new place names?

His findings provide clear answers: Most tree and forest names were given by the Slavic settlers and can be found in the old Slavic settlement area. The later German settlers mostly only translated the Slavic names or adjusted them morphologically or phonetically to German. Names newly assigned by Germans refer much less often to trees and forests.

With the high proportion of tree and forest names in the entire Czech namescape, the author confirms a fact that applies to many Slavic peoples. It can be traced back to the great importance of vegetation for the Slavs, who were in their earlier history mainly farmers, as well as to the special role of trees in Slavic mythology. An additional explanation could be that Germans settled already in lands that had essentially been deforested by their Slavic forerunners. However, when they were farmers, they also had to clear up woods for new farmland and proceeded in this way to the mostly mountainous fringes of the Bohemian lands with a relatively dense wood cover up to the present day and were thus also confronted with trees and wood.

The spatial distribution of place names with reference to trees and forests, especially over different elevation levels, also provides a picture of historical

stages of vegetation cover, some of which differ considerably from the cover today. They can thus be used for studies in land-use change.

The frequent occurrence of the name parts *újezd* and *lhota*, which (also) occur in the old Czech settlement area and refer to a time span needed for riding around a plot, enables a culturally and historically equally interesting conclusion specific for these lands. They denote forms of ownership of the forest, generally of land, according to German law and indicate that peasant land was also given in fiefdom in Czech old settlements under German law, although all those involved were Slavs. They show that, in contrast to old Slavic legal relationships, forms of a more independent peasant class and a certain peasant self-government already existed in the established Czech settlements. This makes it clear that the Bohemian lands share, in addition to other characteristics such as an early system of independent cities and towns, the essential characteristic of an early (relatively) free peasant class in West Central Europe.

Hagionyms commemorating Christian saints tell of course stories about the cultural disposition of the name-giving community, about origin, mode and time of their Christianisation. Should the name part *saint* have been omitted later – as it occurred in general by secularisation and more specifically in the former Communist sphere – this again tells us a lot about cultural and political developments in the community of name users.

Catholic Croatia, e.g., boasts in the post-Communist era again 64 populated places named after saints – not including names of urban districts, churches, chapels, islands, capes, and mountain peaks, for which names commemorating saints are also frequent (Borovac 2002). In the Communist period the name component *Saint* (in Croatian *Sveti, Sveta, Sveto*) had been deleted from all of them. Sveti Filip i Jakov, e.g., was named *Filipjakov*, Sveta Helena *Helena*, Sveta Nedelja just *Nedelja*, Sveti Ivan Zelina just *Zelina* or Sveti Vid Dobrinski *Vid Dobrinski*, to highlight only some cases.

Outside the Communist sphere the later omission of the name component *Saint* is rather exceptional but occurs in some cases and may be regarded as an indication of secularisation. Thus, Hermagor, a town in Austrian Carinthia was earlier named **Sankt Hermagor** ('Saint Hermagor') or even *Sankt Hermagoras* ('Saint Hermagoras'), since it is named after this first bishop and martyr of Aquileia, part of whose see it was. With this specific case of a saint it is, however, relatively easy to do without the name component *Saint*, because *Hermagor* is not easily recognizable as a name after a saint and does contrary to, e.g., *Sankt Johann* or *Sankt Veit* not need this 'explanation'. So, the omission may be interpreted also just as pragmatic and void of an ideological back-

ground. However, the Slovenian name for Hermagor, *Šmohor*, still includes the
name component *Šent* ('Saint') – *Šent* and *Mohor* merged.

Other cases in point are naming after Communist heroes in the Communist
period and the disappearance or preservation of these names after the fall of
Communism.

In the successor states of Yugoslavia, e. g., all names of cities and towns
named after Tito, the prestigious, but ambivalent leader of Communist Yugo-
slavia, have been removed (see Fig. 5), while many names of (main) streets and
squares after him are still in place (see Fig. 6). This allows conclusions at the
political and cultural disposition of the local communities and could be ana-
lysed in various directions.

Fig. 5: Changes of town/city names and a still existing mountain name after Tito,
Titov Vrv (Macedonian!) in the Šar Planina (Thematic content by the author,
base map Magocsi 1993, 47)

Fig. 6: Current intra-urban place names after Tito (Sources: Google Earth, city/town plans; thematic content by the author, base map Magocsi 1993, 47)

The distribution as it appears in Figure 6 corresponds of course to some extent to the disparity of towns/cities in former Yugoslavia. Smaller settlements usually practice no street naming and ex-Yugoslavia had a 'central periphery' with a low urban density in the centre.

But it has also some correlation with the spatial distribution of people, who in ethnic censuses did not affiliate themselves to any Yugoslavian nation [narod] or nationality [nacionalnost], i.e., national minority, but declared themselves to be 'Yugoslavs' in an a-national or supra-national sense – just in the sense of citizenship. This kind of declaration culminated at the population census of 1981, while it declined again in the 1980s up to the next census of 1991 witnessing 're-nationalisation' or reloading of national identities in this period of economic decline and political quarrels after Tito's death in 1980. Affiliation

to the category 'Yugoslavs' was most frequent in ethnically mixed regions and – on the personal level – with ethnically mixed marriages, rather urbanised, better educated and younger people.

The spatial distribution is further influenced by local political preferences. Intra-urban naming is in the successor states of Yugoslavia (as almost every-where else) a matter of local (communal) political authorities. Leftist political directions tended to preserve Tito names, while conservative and national di-rections tried to replace them by names of national or local notables. Main-taining Tito names and other symbols of Communist Yugoslavia was also part of a Yugonostalgia throughout the 1990s, a mode of expressing dissatisfaction with the rather nationalist attitudes dominating in this period in all parts of former Yugoslavia. After their decline in the 2000s, also Yugonostalgia calmed down (see Velikonja 2008).

There are obviously two hot spots of still existing intra-urban Tito names: Istria [Istra] and Voivodina [Vojvodina] plus northern Serbia proper [uža Srbija].

The high density of Tito names on Istria is very likely due to its rather faint Croatian, while much more multicultural and regional identity (see Heilborn 1995); its leftist political orientation at least in the 1990s (see Jordan/Schap-pelwein 1991) and the fact that the prominent and prospering tourist resorts along its coast always attracted migrants from other parts of Yugoslavia – resulting in an ethnically mixed population regarding Tito still as symbol of an all-Yugoslavian 'umbrella' identity. At the Brioni Islands [Brijunski otoci], a former summer residence of Tito, exists a Tito museum presenting him as a respected statesman receiving leaders from all over the world and talking with international movie and art celebrities.

The concentration in Serbian Voivodina and northern Serbia proper can, besides the 'Yugoslavian identity effect', also be explained by rather leftist poli-tical directions and the multicultural identity of this region, which had received its multi-ethnic and multicultural composition by synchronic colonisation after the Ottoman wars in the 18th century under Austrian rule avoiding any privi-leges for one of the groups settling down (see Wolf 2004).

6. Conclusion

It was the intention of this article to highlight the value of place names for investigating human perception of space and place, a major issue in modern geography, in which the constructivist approach prevails, i.e., the approach conceiving geographical space not so much as reality, but as subjectively perceived varying with cultural dispositions and attitudes. The article may thus have just repeated what is evident and well-known to linguists but may also have explained why geographers are increasingly interested in the study of place names. This is so, because place names are indeed condensed narratives in the direction of the geographical feature, when they describe an outstanding characteristic of it, as well as in the direction of the name-giving community, because its naming practice tells something about its cultural disposition. The narrative is, however, very condensed, and it needs a lot of background information to be analysed and interpreted properly.

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[**Abstract:** Geographische Namen können als 'verdichtete Erzählungen' über das geographische Objekt, das sie bezeichnen, sowie über die namengebende Gemeinschaft betrachtet werden. In Richtung des Objekts gilt dies jedoch nur für deskriptive Namen, nicht für Gedenknamen wie Namen nach Personen oder Ereignissen oder für neutrale Namen wie Namen nach Blumen oder Tie-

ren. Die Zuschreibung der Qualität 'verdichteter Erzählungen' beruht auf der Annahme, dass jeder Name mit Bedacht gewählt wurde und ein wesentliches oder auffallendes Merkmal eines Objekts hervorhebt. Allerdings kann dieses Merkmal heute nicht mehr so wichtig sein und ist die Bedeutung eines Namens auch nicht immer transparent, weil Namen oft aus früheren Sprachen oder älteren Schichten einer heute an einem Ort gesprochenen Sprache stammen. Für die heutige Geographie ist dieser Aspekt geographischer Namen deshalb besonders interessant, weil ihr heute vorherrschender konstruktivistischer Ansatz die menschliche Wahrnehmung der Umwelt, des geographischen Raumes und geographischer Objekte in den Mittelpunkt stellt und dafür geographische Namen eine wichtige Informationsquelle besonders über heute nicht mehr existierende Gesellschaften und ältere Schichten der Kulturlandschaft sind. Der Artikel illustriert diesen Gedanken anhand von Beispielen aus Mitteleuropa und dem adriatischen Raum.]