

Place Names as an Expression of Human Relations to Space

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Abstract

This article presents a view on place names from a cultural-geographical perspective by the example of the endonym/exonym divide. This divide is indicative of the role place names play in a cultural-geographical context and may therefore be the most useful and telling when explaining this role. The endonym/exonym divide reflects the difference between ‘ours’ and ‘theirs’: endonyms, in the sense of names given by the community in place, mark features owned by the community or for which that community feels responsible; exonyms, in the sense of names adopted from other communities, reflect the network of a community’s external relations. Besides their role of marking features similar to flags and coats of arms, giving them an inevitable and inescapable political dimension, endonyms exert the very important function of supporting emotional ties between people and place and promoting space-related identity building in this way from the cultural-geographical perspective. The paper departs from the findings of Yi-Fu Tuan in his work *Topophilia* (1974) as regards the various relations between people and space and tries to position the role of place names within this system.

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Introduction

Departing from Yi-Fu Tuan’s basic work *Topophilia* (Tuan 1990 [1974]) and his account of the relation between people and place in general, it can be said that place names (can) have four main functions in the relationship of people to territory or communities to geographical space. In each case, the endonym/exonym divide has a certain meaning; the divide between place names used by the community in place for features on its own territory (‘endonyms’) and features located at the territory of other communities (‘exonyms’).

Endonyms and exonyms are therefore status categories of place names. They are the result of one of many aspects under which place names can be regarded (the aspect leading to the endonym/exonym divide is the spatial relation between the human community using the name and the geographical feature assigned by it; see Fig. 1) and reflect the basic human distinction between ‘ours’ and ‘theirs’.

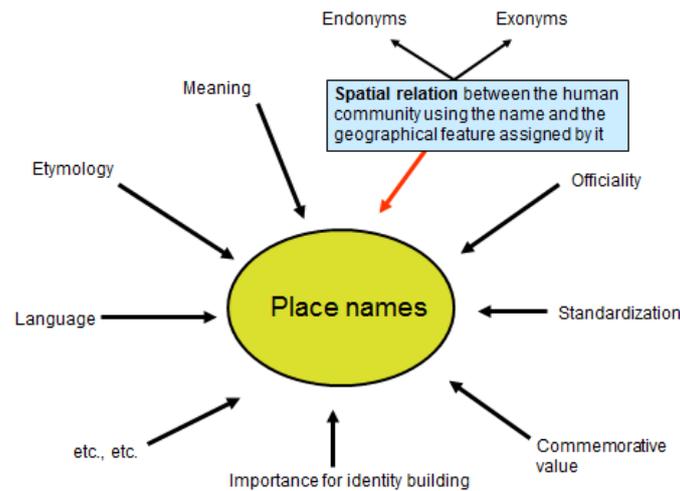


Fig. 1. Aspects under which place names can be regarded

Main Functions of Place Names in Relating People to Territory

So what are these four main functions of place names in relating people to territory and what is the role of the endonym/exonym divide within them?

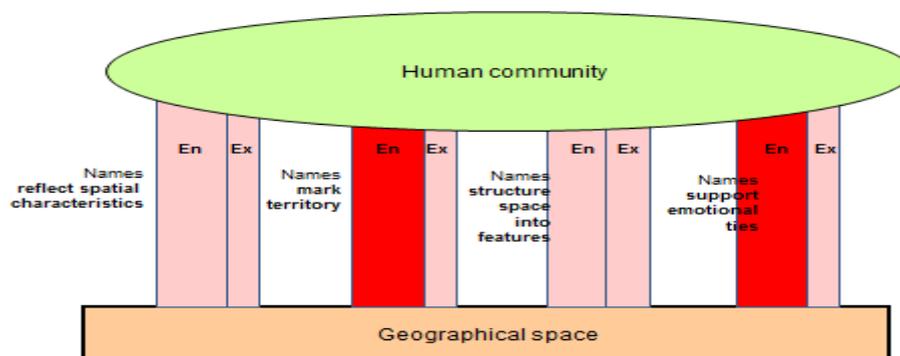


Fig. 2. Roles of place names as mediators between people and space

(1) Place names often reflect the characteristics of geographical features important for a certain community

They often describe location, morphology, bodies of water, vegetation, the soil of a certain place; or the functions of a place within geographical space, e.g. bridges, ports, thoroughfares. They highlight in this way characteristics that seemed important to the people, who named the place within the context of their culture and their specific interests. Farmers had different naming motives than shepherds, a seafarer's motives differed from a mountain dweller's. Place names are in this way 'condensed narratives' about the cultural disposition of a name giving community.

This function affects endonyms and exonyms as well. The endonym/exonym divide has no meaning for it in qualitative terms, but quantitatively. In most cases it is the resident community that assigns place names. External visitors rarely assign place names – but it happens: explorers, alpinists, seafarers or scientists assign new names to geographical features such as mountain peaks, large seas or oceans, submarine features, features in unpopulated areas like Antarctica. These names are exonyms.

(2) Place names mark the territory of a community

This function comprises communities and their territory of all categories and sizes, from a nation to an ethnic minority (Fig. 3), and even down to the level of a family within a home or a person using an office. A label assigning a personal name at the door of an office functions then as a place name (Fig. 4).



Fig. 3. Bilingual Polish-Kashubian signpost in the Kashubian minority region of Poland (Photo: Maciej Zych 2012)



Fig. 4. Name label indicating that this is ‘my territory’ (Photo: Peter Jordan 2014)

In this function, the endonym/exonym divide is essential and even constitutive: Names for geographical features at the community's own territory are endonyms ('names from within'). Endonyms in this function are symbols of appropriation. Who owns a feature or has the responsibility for it, usually reserves the right to name it. This function is similar to that performed by flags, coats of arms or logos.

For geographical features outside its own territory a community will usually adopt existing names, translating them into its own language or adapting them morphologically or phonetically. In contrast to names for features on its own territory, i.e. endonyms, these are exonyms, needed by a community to mark features outside its own territory in such a way that their use is comfortable, i.e. pronounceable and easy to communicate.

In contrast to endonyms, exonyms are not symbols of appropriation and do not express claims, instead they indicate the importance of a feature for this community and the relations it has with it, i.e. its network of external relations (Fig. 5, see also Jordan 2009a). Exonyms help to integrate this foreign feature into the cultural sphere of a community and help avoid exclusion and alienation (Back 2002). However, it is also true that the use of an exonym is sometimes conceived as exerting a claim, especially when exonyms correspond to historical endonyms. However, this is a misunderstanding, which should be erased, also by a politically sensitive use of exonyms (see Jordan 2000).

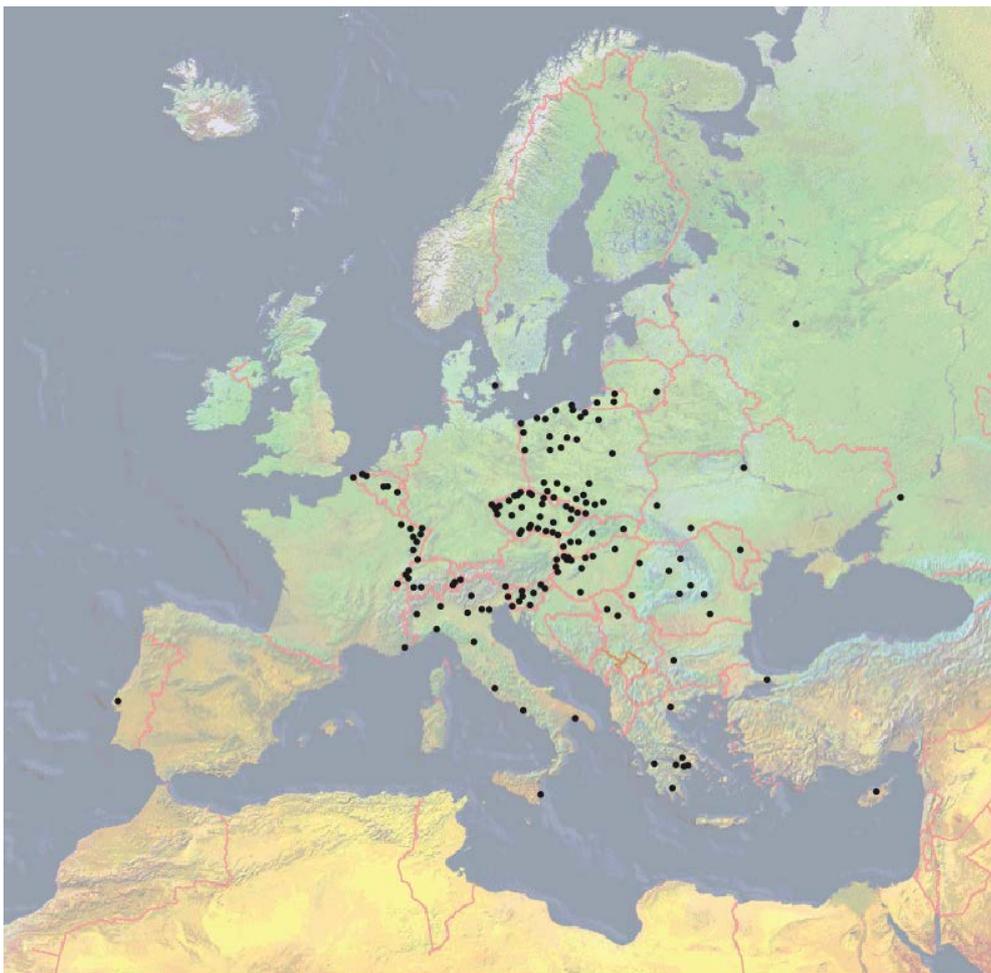


Fig. 5. German exonyms for towns and cities (Thematic layer based on AKO 2012)

(3) Place names structure territory 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. Even very distinct features from our point of view – such as a significant mountain or an island – are not features ‘by nature’, rather they exist as subunits of space within a certain cultural background.

This is especially the case with landscapes, cultural regions or macro-regions lacking clear limits such as current administrative boundaries, ‘natural boundaries’ like mountain ranges or rivers. The matter of how far Europe extends to the east is obviously just a convention. In reality, it is impossible to find clear boundaries of Central or West Europe.

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 identities, 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.

This function affects endonyms and exonyms likewise. However, exonyms can structure space differently from endonyms: while, for example, Romanians have a different name (*Câmpia de Vest*) for their share in the Great Hungarian Lowland, the English exonym includes it.

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

If somebody is acquainted with a place, reads, mentions or memorizes a place name, this recalls all the contents of a space-related concept for them, reminding them of sights, persons, events, smells, sounds associated with this place and facilitating ‘the feel of a place’, as Yi-Fu Tuan (1991) calls it.

The endonym/exonym divide has for this function a differentiating effect in quantitative and – more importantly – also in qualitative terms: for the local community the emotional relationship to a place is usually deeper and more important. However, exonyms can convey emotions too by reminding of images a person has of a certain place, even if they never have been there. *Rome* and *Auschwitz* are very likely the counterparts on the range from positive to negative images conveyed by exonyms. These images are often supported or influenced by active brand management.

Problems of Defining the Endonym/Exonym Divide

It is, however not an easy task to precisely delineate between the concepts of the endonym and the exonym. This was noted during the discussions of the UNGEGN Working Group on Exonyms.¹ I can address here only some of the problems faced. Whilst the arguments might

¹ The Working Group on Exonyms is one of ten thematic working groups of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN). The Working Group was founded in 2002 and some of its main tasks are the exact definition of the endonym/exonym divide, as well as to determine criteria for the use of

sound convoluted and theoretical, they all have a very concrete political meaning and are politically highly sensitive.

The question of who is entitled to assign the primary name, the endonym is an inherently political one, which can easily lead to political conflict, especially when dealing with the names of populated places, administrative units (when, for example, communes are merged), streets or features in areas where linguistic minorities reside.

Interfering with endonyms – the names of the local community – in this context is always a matter of interfering in local affairs, into the civil society in place. This is no problem for authoritarian political regimes (like those in the former Communist parts of Europe), but always a challenge in our democratic societies. Sensitivity on behalf of public authorities for the endonym/exonym divide may even be regarded as a quality proof for democratic systems.

What are then the problems as regards the delimitation of endonym and exonym?

(1) Who is the local community?

One of the main problems relates to the question of who actually constitutes the local community. As a point of departure it must be mentioned that no community is completely homogenous. It is always composed of a dominant portion and non-dominant subgroups. This is even true for the smallest human community, the personal partnership. Also here we usually find a dominant and a non-dominant part.

The dominant portion of a community is of course in the position to decree the use of a name, to oblige other community members to use a name – whether they like it or not. Consequently, some parts of a community may feel that a certain name is not their name, not the endonym, but a name imposed to them, a name from the outside – rather an exonym.

It is also a fact that we usually do not belong to only one community, but rather to a multitude of them – we have in fact multiple identities, also multiple space-related identities (see Fig. 6). We are not only inhabitants of a village, but also of a commune, city and region. We are at the same time citizens of a country. We can feel a very strong emotional attachment to our country as such, when we hear the national anthem, watch sports events in which our national team is involved, while we may never have been in some parts of our country, nor appreciate the attitudes of all of our fellow citizens. We are also members of a nation, a language community (e.g. the English). We are citizens of an association of countries like the European Union. We may even consider ourselves inhabitants of our continent or to be global citizens, when we engage ourselves in questions such as climate change, global disparities in development, etc.

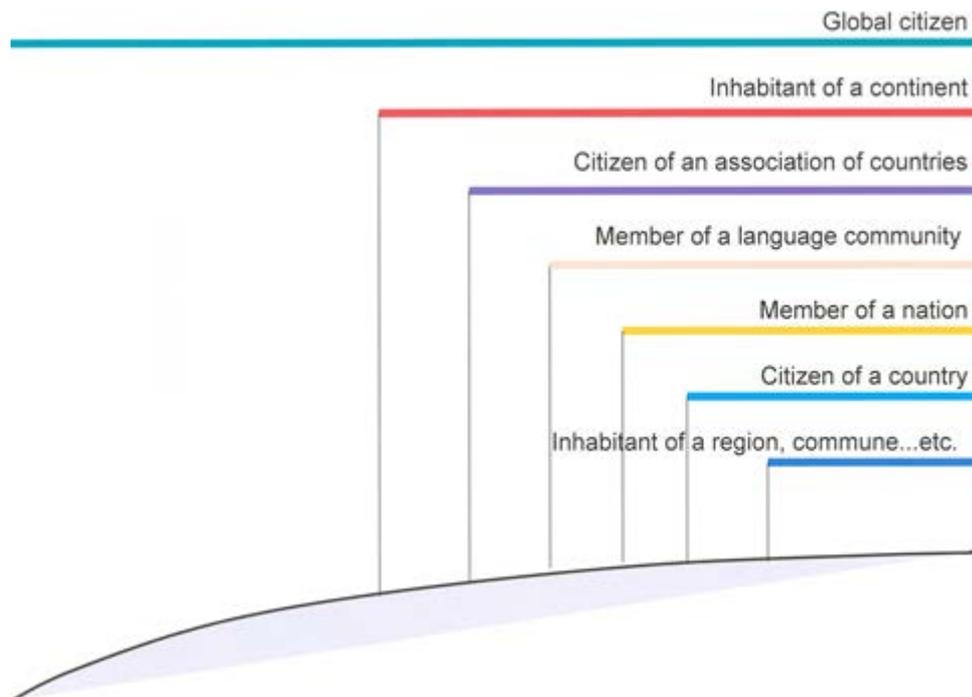


Fig. 6. Our multiple space-related identities

So who is the community in place, when it comes to define, whose name is the endonym and the exonym? According to the subsidiarity principle, it is always the group of people inhabiting a feature or residing closest to a feature. In the case of a family house, this is the owner family. Even if the family has only bought the house recently, it has the endonym for it (see Fig. 7).

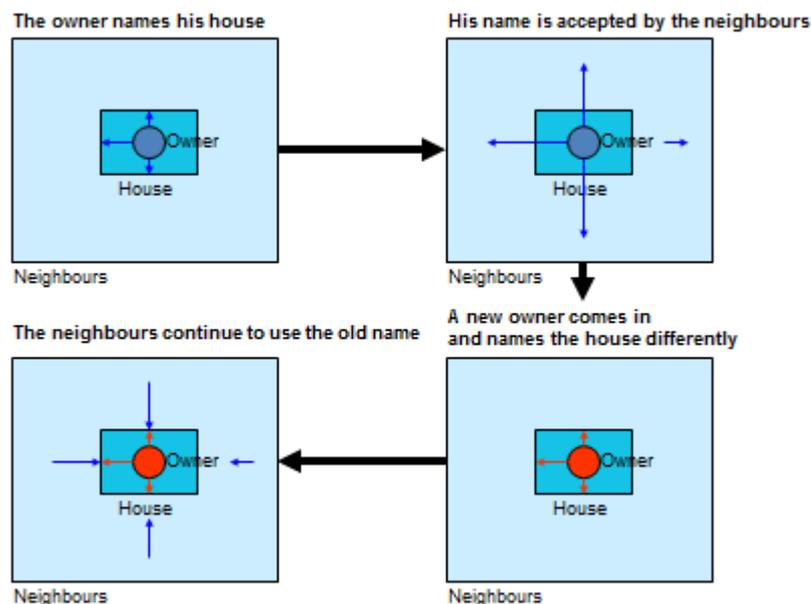


Fig. 7. A new house owner comes in and imports a new endonym

With features inhabited by more than one community, starting with streets and proceeding via villages, towns and cities through regions and states, up to the global level, all communities in place have an endonym for the name of their corresponding reference unit – i.e. the communities residing in a street for the name of this street; the communities residing in a town for the name of this town, and so on.

In these competitive situations the quality of autochthony, of a certain temporal presence, becomes relevant, too. But what is the timespan necessary to qualify a community as autochthonous? Are the names of young immigrant communities endonyms? The usual answer is: they have to be present for at least three generations. Only then has their culture proved to be persistent. And only then they feel the need to assign their own names to features. But the question is delicate and intensively discussed.

(2) How far does the territory of the local community extend?

The answer to this question is easy, when all the territory is inhabited by the community. But the problem is much more complex outside populated territories and even more so with seas. In such cases, it is rather difficult to say where exactly a community's sense of responsibility and emotional attachment ends.

From my experience with the Adriatic Sea, I know that coastal dwellers have a profound emotional relation to their coastal waters in the sense of waters between the islands and in visible distance from the coast, where fisherboats and tourist vessels cruise. They are as much part of their living space as the land is. They are resources of food, areas for transportation.

In Opatija on the Croatian coast, for example, a tradition exists whereby on the Catholic holiday of Corpus Christi, the priest, surrounded by a whole procession of vessels, blesses the sea 'and all that lives in it' from a fishing boat. This documents the emotional relation of the coastal dwelling community with its coastal waters.

The high sea – the sea beyond the horizon from the coast – is another case again. Here it is necessary to differentiate between the cognitive and the emotional level. Emotionally, the high sea is conceived as endless, even a narrow sea like the Adriatic, where the opposite coast can be seen from a mountain top on a clear day. This is expressed by songs for example, which frequently use *sea* as a metaphor for the unlimited, the indefinite, the inconceivable. Endlessness is also expressed using special words for the high sea, e.g. not *more*, but *pućina* in Croatian, which means something like *wilderness, where the winds blow*, etc. I conclude from this attitude that, emotionally, coastal dwellers recognize no opposite coast, no counterpart beyond the horizon; would consequently also not draw a strict line between 'ours' and 'theirs' somewhere out in the sea; would also not feel the necessity to confine the endonym status of their own name to some part of the sea; would possibly extend it to the sea in its entirety (because they feel that this status is not contested by anybody else).

However, I would also guess that the intensity of this feeling fades away more or less as a function of distance, the feeling of being the owner of the sea is relative insofar as it is combined with the other feeling that the sea is endless and inconceivable. (It is in the nature of the endless and the inconceivable that it can never be completely owned, that it is impossible to achieve full command of it.)

At the cognitive level, coastal dwellers are in any case aware that the sea ends somewhere; that there is an opposite coast, inhabited by another community, who have a different name for it. They have learned this in schools, from maps and charts and from the media. Based on this knowledge, they would, however, usually (with the only exception of a politically aggressive and expansive attitude) be ready to acknowledge and accept that their own name loses its endonym status somewhere in between this opposite coast and their own coast; would have no problem with accepting regulations ruling that there is some ‘artificial’ line between where their name has endonym status and where the name of the others is valid as an endonym (see Fig. 8). They will usually – as in many other fields of social interaction – accept that their rights ends where the rights of others begins, if this avoids dispute and conflict.

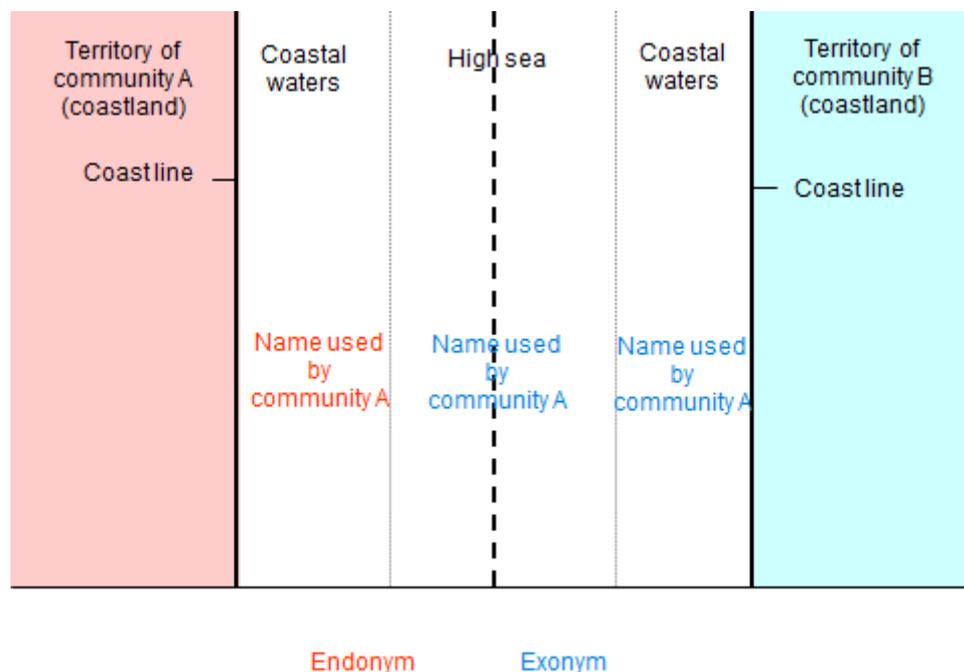


Fig. 8. The endonym/exonym divide on seas (cognitive level)

There are also difficult cases on land, for example, in a country with a dominant community and inhabited, spatially concentrated, by a non-dominant community.

There may be an unpopulated mountain (range) located adjacent to the minority region (Fig. 9). It is not inhabited by the minority group. It is also not administratively incorporated into their territory, and so not officially attributed to them. However, they see it every day; it is perhaps an area of recreation for them; it is perhaps also an economic resource for them; and they have developed emotional ties to it. It is part of their place in the sense of Tuan. All the same is true for the majority community at the other side of the mountain.

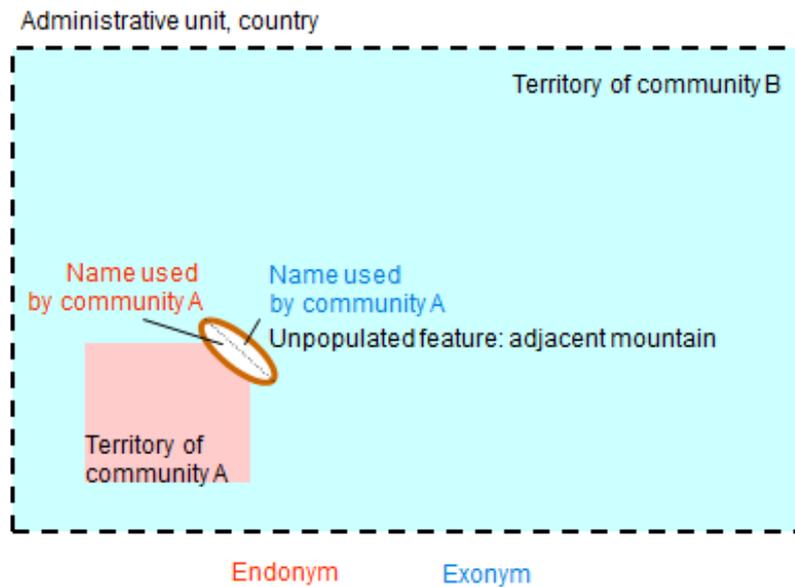


Fig. 9. The endonym/exonym divide with an unpopulated mountain range at the boundary between two communities

It has to be added that mountains and mountain ranges mostly look different from both sides. Inhabitants on one side might not even recognize it from the other side.

This all makes it reasonable to say that the mountain is a divided property between the two communities. The minority can regard it as a part of its own territory only on its own side; the minority's name for it enjoys endonym status only on its own side (but is valid for the whole feature, of course) and becomes an exonym at the other.

An unpopulated mountain (range) outside the minority region, but still in visible distance, is a different case (Fig. 10). The minority community can perhaps see it every day and have an emotional attachment to it, but it does not exploit it economically and – regardless of how strong the relations of the minority community to this feature may be – the other community is closer to the feature and has (very likely) stronger relations to it. This makes it reasonable that the name of the minority community for this feature is only the exonym there.

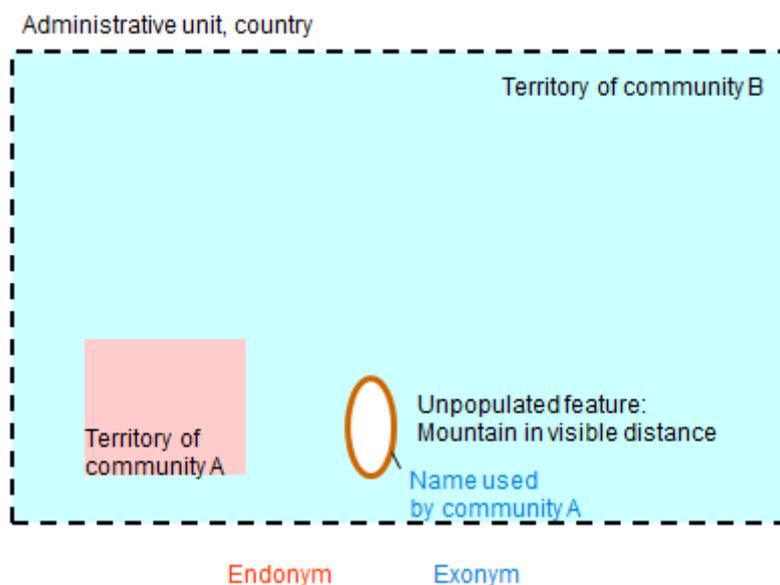


Fig. 10. The endonym/exonym divide with an unpopulated mountain range outside, but in visible distance of a minority community

What is it like, if the feature on the boundary between the two communities is a lake (Fig. 11)? A lake has all the characteristics relevant for the local community as mentioned earlier with the mountain, except that its surface is flat and that it is mostly possible to see the opposite coast. So the lake is much less divisible in ownership and emotional terms than a mountain. Wouldn't it be appropriate to say that it is owned by both communities likewise and the name of both communities for the lake has endonym status at every spot of the lake – even at the opposite bank?

I would answer this question in the negative, since at the opposite bank the other community is nearer to the spot. So in a competitive situation between two claims (as it is) it has the stronger claim to attributing the endonym, the primary name. This is in accordance with many other judicial issues. So an imaginary line has to be drawn on the lake dividing it into the endonym areas of the two groups.

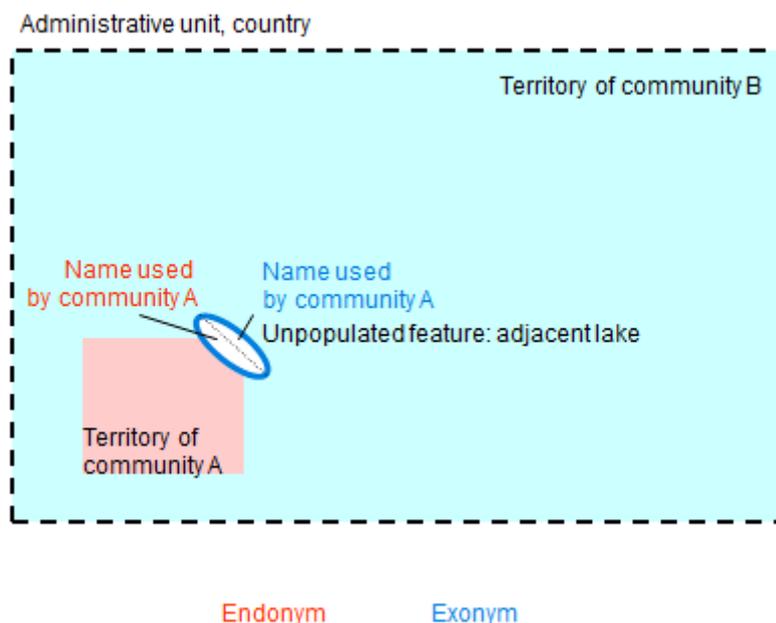


Fig. 11. The endonym/exonym divide with a lake at the boundary between two communities

The last of many other cases that could be mentioned is a capital city geographically far removed from a minority region, but administratively responsible for it (Fig. 12). This establishes a functional relation between the minority and this city, perhaps also an emotional tie: 'This is our capital.', 'The events there affect us too.', 'The landmarks of this city have also a symbolic meaning for us.' Nevertheless, if the minority is not part of the autochthonous population there, the same argument as before applies in this case too: There is another group in place (or closer to this place) and only the name of this other group has endonym status.

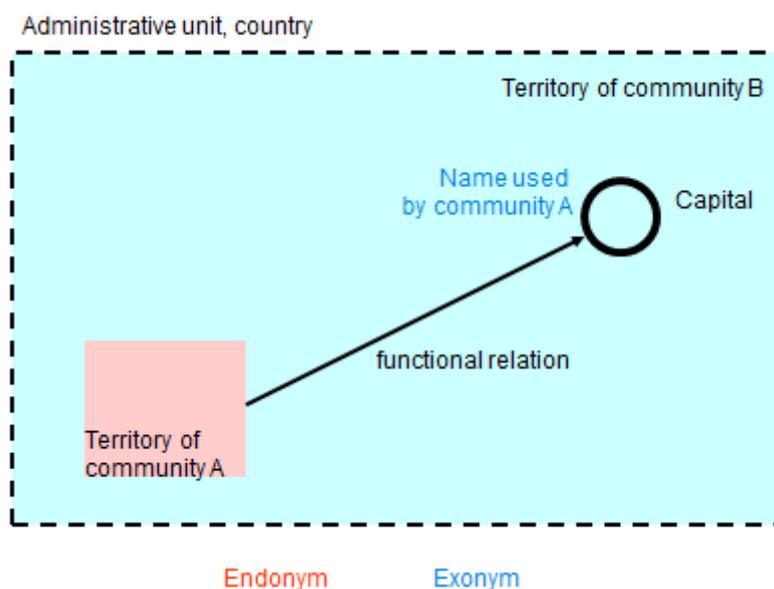


Fig. 12. The endonym/exonym divide related to a capital, to which also a minority community outside the capital has a functional relationship

(3) Can the endonym/exonym divide also occur within a linguistic community?

Let us imagine a situation as it is presented in Fig. 13: Three towns are located in the territory of the same linguistic community. Town A is populated by the community CA, which is the local community of this town. The name used by this community for this town is therefore an endonym. The community of Town B is no longer the local community of Town A, but uses the same name for Town A as the local community. So it uses the endonym. The community inhabiting Town C uses a name for Town A different from the name used by the inhabitants of Town A. So it uses an exonym – even when it is a name in the same language.

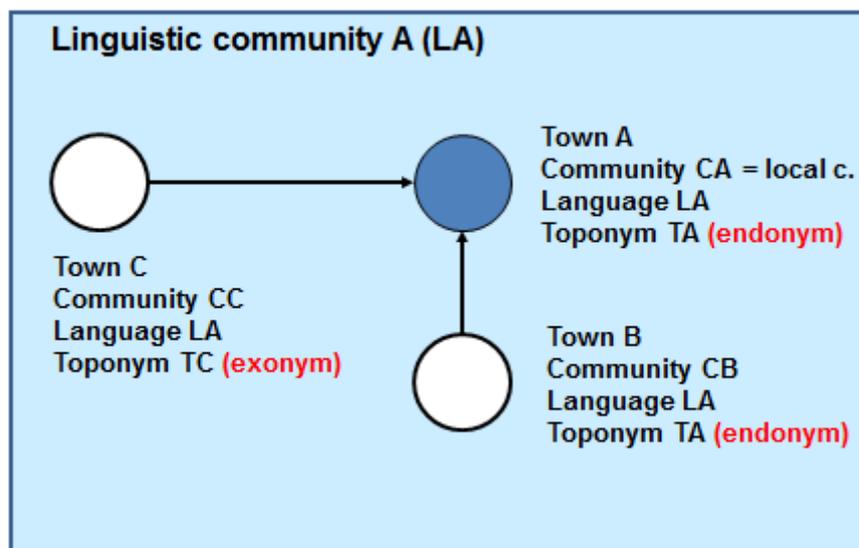


Fig. 13. An endonym/exonym divide inside a linguistic community

This is not an exceptional case: Nicknames or pejorative names (e.g. *Blava* for *Bratislava*) from the outside are quite frequent. But also at the level of standard place names this may occur. German speakers at the lower run of the Romanian river Mureş, for example, call the entire river *Marosch*, while local Germans at the upper run of the same river call it *Mieresch*. Another case in point is the dichotomy between *Derry* and *Londonderry* in Northern Ireland.

(4) Is an official name necessarily an endonym?

For sure, every inhabitant of a village, town or city is at the same time the citizen of a country and a member of a nation. So, what happens, if the official name assigned by the authorities of this country differs from the name used locally? Is the official name in this case an exonym?

A possible answer could be that the official name is also an endonym (in addition to the name in local use), if the official authorities are sufficiently legitimized to assign and use this name and do this in accordance to law. In this case, they act as representatives of all citizens – also of the inhabitants of the place in question.

If, however, these authorities represent an occupation force, the official name has to be regarded as forcefully imposed and as an exonym – as in the case of the Polish city of

Łódź, which was officially named *Litzmannstadt* by the German occupation force during World War II, although this name was never used by the local population – not even by the small German minority, who used *Lodsch*, the phonetic and orthographic adaptation of the Polish name to German.

Another case in point is the new Italian naming in the interwar period in South Tyrol [Südtirol/Alto Adige] with its German population and names, which was conceived by the local community as a kind of cultural aggression.

Conclusion

Place names support space-related identities, contribute in this way to human territoriality, help to distinguish between ‘ours’ and ‘theirs’ and have for this reason always and unavoidably sociological, political and juridical implications.

The endonym/exonym divide has a strong political and sociological significance. The community closer to the feature, owning it or feeling responsible for it, has the right to the primary name, the endonym, and regards it as a part of its culture. Under democratic conditions it will insist on this right and even risk conflict.

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