

# Emotional Expressivity in Czech Toponymy

Pavel Štěpán

*The Czech Republic*

## Abstract

The paper deals with various kinds of emotional expressivity of Czech toponyms, with respect to the specific character of proper names, whose functions and nature of meaning are distinct from common nouns. The analysed data is formed by Czech settlement names (mostly names of village parts) and especially by names of non-settlement places (mainly field names) from the territory of Bohemia. Emotionality, whose role in the individual naming act is studied, is given by the expressive character of the lexical basis, the emotional symptom of the means of name formation, or by the specific character of the naming act. Expressing the individual emotions is analysed: negative emotions strongly prevail; expressing positive emotions is rather rare in toponyms. Emotionality given by lexical elements is often connected with metaphor. Some attention is devoted also to the development of emotional symptoms of toponyms, their loss (including the suppression of negative emotionality, realised by deliberate changes of toponyms) as well as emotionality attributed to some names subsequently, on the basis of folk etymology.

\* \* \*

## Introduction

The paper<sup>1</sup> deals with the issue of emotional expressivity of Czech toponyms. This topic has to date not been systematically studied in Czech onomastics; only several partial minor studies oriented on some particular problems have been published (e.g. David 2001, 2002; Lutterer 1964, 1968; Spal 1969). A study oriented on one aspect of emotional expressivity is available for Slovak toponyms (Krško 2006; this article provides some important comparative data). The data analysed in this paper are made up of Czech settlement names, especially names of village parts, individual houses and other minor settlements, and names of unsettled places (mainly field names) from the territory of Bohemia (accessible thanks to the database of non-settlement names created at the Institute of the Czech Language in Prague).

## Emotional Expressivity in the Language

The term ‘expressivity’, traditionally used in Czech linguistics for the pragmatic part of the meaning of a linguistic means, given by the attitude of the speaker, may be rather ambiguous in English; for this reason, I use an extended term ‘emotional expressivity’. If an attitude of the speaker is present, the given linguistic expression is usually evaluated as expressively/emotionally marked. The emotional symptoms of a linguistic expression, having

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper was supported by the GA ČR project Nr. P406/12/P600 and by RVO: 68378092.

a stylistic effect, can be identified on different levels of the language (phonological, lexical, grammatical, etc.).<sup>2</sup>

## Emotional Expressivity in Proper Names

The nature of proper names differs substantially from that of common nouns. The lexical meaning of the individual lexical elements found in toponyms (as well as in other categories of proper names) is usually not relevant in communication. However, in some specific cases the lexical meaning or a specific formal device of a toponym can be foregrounded and may gain some relevance. The result of this foregrounding is that some toponyms may be perceived as emotionally marked. A name gains its emotional symptom usually by the naming act, but sometimes a secondary emotional symptom may be gained later, or the emotional markedness may be lost over time.

## Emotional Expressivity in Toponyms

The emotional expressivity of toponyms is a complex phenomenon which may be influenced by three major aspects: (1) an expressive (emotional) character of the lexical basis, (2) an emotional symptom of the form of the given toponym (typically a specific means of word-formation, rarely also emotionally specific sound quality of the name), (3) specificity of the naming act – use of irony, specific use of metaphor. These three aspects are often diversely combined together in individual toponyms.

### Emotionally Expressive Character of the Lexical Basis

The boundaries of the ‘lexical’ emotional expressivity found in toponyms are not sharply defined and it is not easy to define the criteria for its delimitation. As emotional expressivity is narrowly connected with evaluation, such names by which the namegivers express their opinion of the named object are considered to be emotionally expressive for the purpose of this paper.

Lexical bases found in toponyms may express (i) negative evaluation, (ii) derision, ridicule or mockery, which is very close to negative evaluation, or, less frequently, (iii) positive evaluation.

#### *Negative Evaluation*

The toponym *Mizerná* ‘very poor, miserable, lousy’ reflects the poor quality of the named meadow and its grass. The name *Škaredá cesta* ‘ugly, nasty, hideous road’ belongs to a stony, extremely steep and dangerous, barely passable road.

A specific subgroup of toponyms belonging to this category expresses fear or supposed danger. These names are often connected with local legends bound to the named objects. For

---

<sup>2</sup> Towards the issue of emotionality/expressivity in the language cf., for example, Burke (2006), Daneš (1990), Volek (1987), Zima (1961).

example, the toponym *Strašná skála* ‘fearful, awful rock’ refers to a rock which was supposedly a retreat of highwaymen or robbers.

### *Derision, Ridicule or Mockery*

Another category of emotionally coloured toponyms is formed by derisive, ridiculing, mocking names. As the purpose of these names was always to ridicule some people, these names usually refer to settled objects, especially minor settlements, houses, inns, or parts of villages. For example, the frequent name *Rafanda* derived from the strongly emotionally expressive verb *rafat se* ‘squabble, bicker, quarrel’ refers to a number of colonies of houses built usually after World War I by poorer people. This derisive name was inspired by frequent quarrels among people living in these localities. Many ridiculing names include vulgarisms or infantile expressions. These two specific groups of emotionally coloured expressions will be analysed later. Derision is also often connected with irony, which will also be dealt with later.

### *Positive Evaluation*

Positive evaluation is less frequent in toponyms. Names of wayside inns like *Radost, Na Radosti* ‘joy, delight, pleasure’ were meant to attract travellers. Positive evaluation may be encountered also in pond names: toponyms like *Rozkoš* ‘pleasure, delight’ or *Potěšil* (derived from the verb *potěšit* ‘to please, delight, make somebody happy’) refer to ponds bringing high profits. A positive emotion may be attributed to objects named by tourists during 19th and 20th centuries; cf. the name *Půvabná vyhlídka* ‘charming outlook’ belonging to an outlook site in the rock labyrinth of Prachovské skály, a famous Czech tourist destination in East Bohemia.

Two specific groups of emotionally coloured lexemes found in toponyms can be delimited:

### *Vulgarisms*

Taboo expressions, most often connected with the area of excretion, are often found among non-standardised toponyms. They are used either directly, referring to places where people often obeyed a call of nature, or – more often – metaphorically in names of small and unimportant objects, dark places or houses (typically a pub without a window), or springs characterised due to their small intensity or specific sounds. These names are often used derisively.

### *Infantile Expressions*

Another means often used for derision is infantile expressions. For example, the inn name *Bacanda* is derived from an infantile verb *bacat* ‘smack, spank; physically punish a child’. This childish expression was probably used to create a derisive name inspired by the frequent fights that took place in this pub.

## Formal Devices of Emotional Expressivity

Formal devices of emotional expressivity comprise mostly processes of word formation (name formation): mostly suffixes, less often some specific types of composition.

### *Suffixes*

In Czech toponyms, the most typical example of an emotionally coloured suffix is *-(a)nda*. This suffix is used for the formation of several different groups of common nouns, all of which have a strong symptom of emotional expressivity. In toponyms, this emotionally expressive suffix is connected with verbs that are usually emotionally coloured themselves (cf. the examples *Rafanda* and *Bacanda*, mentioned above), but also with (emotionally neutral) proper nouns, common nouns and adjectives.

For example, three streets in the town of Brandýs nad Labem (central Bohemia) are named according to nearby geographical objects. They are derived by a regular adjective suffix *-ská* from the hydronym *Labe* (river *Elbe*) and oikonyms *Zápy* and *Kostelec*. The official standardised names of these streets are thus *Labská*, *Zápská* and *Kostelecká*. Their locally used variants *Labanda*, *Zápanda* and *Kostelanda* have a strong symptom of informality and emotionality, which is given by the emotionally expressive suffix *-anda*.

### *Composition*

In Czech (as in other Slavic languages), composition is not a dominant device used for formation of toponyms. Nevertheless, compound oikonyms form an interesting group of emotionally marked toponyms (cf. Lutterer 1964). In non-settlement names and names of village parts, forming the core of the data analysed in this paper, emotionally marked compound names are not so frequent. For example, the compound forest name *Zlamnoha*, consisting of the verb *zlámat* ‘break’ and the common noun *noha* ‘leg’, reflects the terrain situation of the given locality; it belongs to a forest full of old pits used for iron ore mining. This type of composition is not typical of non-expressive Czech lexemes.

## Specificity of the Naming Act

In many toponyms emotional expressivity is connected neither with the lexical base of the name, nor with the form of the derived or compound name, but it is influenced by a specific character of the naming act, which may be based on irony or metaphor.

### **Irony**

Ironical toponyms combine derision with negative evaluation, which is disguised as something positive. Ironical toponyms are always strongly expressive at the time of their origin. For example, poor little cottages were given ironical names like *Ve vile* ‘Villa’ or *Burk* (from German *Burg* ‘castle’).

## Metaphor

As it has been already hinted, metaphor plays an important role in many toponyms based on lexemes bearing a strong emotional connotation. Moreover, the specific metaphorical character of the naming act can be the only bearer of emotional expressivity in some toponyms; that is, the lexical unit itself has no inherent emotional symptom; this symptom is gained only during the naming act by means of metaphor. This is true especially for toponyms created by a metaphorical transfer of other toponyms. For example, when an Abyssinian (Ethiopian) village was presented at the Prague Jubilee Exhibition in 1908, several colonies of new houses in Bohemia, which reportedly in a way resembled the presented Abyssinian houses, got a metaphorical, rather derisive name *Habeš* (Abyssinia).

## Attitudes of the Informants towards the Emotional Expressivity of the Individual Names

Using the data of the register of minor place names in Bohemia gathered by local informants from individual localities, comments of the informants regarding the emotional expressivity, derisive symptoms or pejorative character of the individual names can be often encountered. Many of the analysed names are labelled as pejorative, derogatory, derisive or mocking by the informants. In some cases, the informants seem to be ashamed to adduce a vulgar toponym. For example, one of the streets in the town of Mníchovo Hradiště, according to the local informant, ‘was always polluted, therefore it had a pejorative name *Po.....*’. The vulgar name meaning ‘polluted by excrements’ is indicated only by its first syllable in the local register of names.

## Parallel Names and Renaming

Emotionally marked names are often not standardised and they are used unofficially. In case of field names, for example, there is usually no need to create an official parallel name of the given object because these objects are usually referred to exclusively in the local, unofficial background. Names of parts of villages represent another case: they are also used in official communication; moreover, they are usually associated with local inhabitants and therefore their use may be more problematic. For this reason, names parallel to emotionally marked names of settlement objects are often created. For example, one of the informants makes the following comment about the settlement name *Rafanda*, referring to reported quarrels among neighbours (see above): ‘Its correct name is *Nová čtvrť* “new quarter”, but nobody uses it.’ These new ‘positive’ names of village parts, individual houses or streets were formed artificially and usually did not catch on in everyday communication in the given locality.

In the case of oikonyms referring to the individual communities, which must always be standardised, the strong emotional markedness may lead to an official change of the name. For example, in 1923, the toponym *Svrabov* derived from the common known *svrab* ‘scabies (dermal disease)’, was changed to *Svatbín*. The new formation, trying to be more positive, was inspired by the common noun *svatba* ‘wedding’. A. Profous (1957: 262), the author of

the extensive dictionary of place names in Bohemia, evaluates this new name as ‘absolutely incorrect’.

## Change of Emotional Expressivity in Time: Folk Etymology

Sometimes the change of the toponym is influenced by a folk etymology. Not the real origin of the name, but its current perception is important in these cases. Thus the oikonym *Oselno*, derived from the old Slavic noun *osla* ‘grindstone’, was later misunderstood and associated with the noun *osel* ‘donkey’, used also as an offensive word for a person. Therefore the name was changed to *Úsilné*, evoking an association with the noun *úsilí* ‘effort’.

The field name *V Ráji* is supposed to include the common noun *ráj* ‘paradise’. The informant evaluates this toponym as an ironical, derisive name, because the given field is extremely wet and infertile. However, the origin of the name is probably different: more likely it is connected with the old Slavic term *raj* denoting ‘mud’ (cf. frequent Slavic toponyms derived from the base *raj-* referring to muddy, wet terrain, see Rymut 1980: 202; Šimunović 1981: 188). Thus, originally this toponym had no emotional or ironical connotation; it probably came into existence as a factual name of a damp, muddy place. The possible ironical perception is only secondary in this case.

## Conclusion

To summarise the most important findings of the paper, it can be concluded that:

a) Three basic types of emotional expressivity of toponyms have been distinguished; they are caused by expressivity of lexemes occurring in the names, formal expressivity (concerning mostly word-formation), and the specific character of the naming act (irony, metaphor).

b) The emotionally expressive toponyms express most frequently negative evaluation or derision, ridicule; positive evaluation is found rather rarely in them.

c) The most frequent naming motives of emotionally marked toponyms include quality of the named object, its size and relative distance, or a character of the inhabitants of the place or owners (users) of the object.

d) Due to their specific character, emotionally marked toponyms are often not standardised. If the need for a standardised name arises, a new, rather artificial name is often formed, which, however, rarely catches on in everyday communication in the given locality. If a standardised toponym is regarded to be pejorative (sometimes regardless of its actual etymology), it can be officially changed. Local informants are usually aware of the emotional character of the individual names, they often comment on it, though sometimes they do not evaluate it entirely properly.

Pavel Štěpán  
The Academy of Sciences  
of the Czech Republic,  
The Czech Republic  
stepan@ujc.cas.cz

## References

- Burke, M. (2006) 'Emotion: Stylistic Approaches'. In: Brown, K. (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*. Vol. 4. 2nd edn. Boston: Elsevier. 127-129.
- Daneš, F. (1990) 'Cognition and Emotion in Discourse Interaction: A Preliminary Survey of the Field'. In: Bahner, W. et al. (eds.) *Proceedings of the 14th International Congress of Linguists*. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag. 168-179.
- David, J. (2001) 'Lidová etymologie a vulgarismy v toponymech'. *Jazykovědné aktuality* 38. 34-39.
- David, J. (2002) 'Suchý nebo Píčov? (K jednomu místnímu jménu z Boskovicka)'. In: *Sborník Muzea Blansko 2002*. Blansko: Muzeum Blansko. 89-91.
- Krško, J. (2006) 'Metaforické a expresívne vyjádrenie kvality a vzdialenosti v slovenskej toponymii'. In: Olšiak, M. (ed.) *Varia 14: zborník materiálov zo XIV. kolokvia mladých jazykovedcov: Nitra-Šintava, 8.-10. 12. 2004*. Bratislava: Slovenská jazykovedná spoločnosť pri SAV. 224-231.
- Lutterer, I. (1964) 'Psychologie pojmenování a tzv. předložková jména místní'. *Naše řeč* 47. 81-87.
- Lutterer, I. (1968) 'Ráj a Peklo v toponymii Čech'. In: Hrabec, S. et al. (eds.) *Symbolae Philologicae in honorem Vitoldi Taszycki*. Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy imienia Ossolińskich. 209-217.
- Rymut, K. (1980) *Nazwy miast Polski*. Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy imienia Ossolińskich.
- Spal, J. (1969) 'Místní jména „loupežnická“'. *Zpravodaj Místopisné komise ČSAV* 10. 755-757.
- Šimunović, P. (1981) 'Hidronimijski apelativi u hidronimima'. In: Jakopin, F. (ed.) *Četvrta jugoslovanska onomastična konferenca*. Ljubljana: SAZU. 187-198.
- Volek, B. (1987) *Emotive Signs in Language and Semantic Functioning of Derived Nouns in Russian*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Zima, J. (1961) *Expresivita slova v současné češtině*. Praha: ČSAV.