

Some Semantic Universals in Latvian Toponymy

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Abstract

There is a general assumption in onomastics that investigation of place names should begin with semantic universals of toponymy (V. Toporov, L. Nevskaja, V. Ivanov), namely, with the investigation of metaphoric toponyms derived from appellatives of body parts or utilitarian objects. Semantic universals can be divided into three groups: universals of language groups, universals of language family, and international or absolute semantic universals.

Approximately a twentieth part of Latvian toponyms are derived from terms of anatomic or utilitarian objects. Mainly three types of physiogeographical objects are named metaphorically: relief objects – elevations (*galva* ‘head : hill’, *mugura* ‘back : hill’, etc.) or reductions (*rīkle* ‘throat : estuary’, *bļūda* ‘bowl : dale’, etc.), long objects (*aste* ‘tail’, *kāja* ‘feet’, *mēle* ‘tongue’, etc.), hydrographical objects (*acs* ‘eye : pool’, etc.).

Analysis of Latvian semantic universals shows at least three ways of formation of semantic universals – terms of body parts may have flowed into place names due to archetypical concepts, utilitarian object designations – according to the principles of language formation – by world perception through metaphor, but sometimes they have formed according to folklore. Toponymic semantic universals, from the point of view of derivation, can be divided into *conceptual semantic universals* and *lexico-semantic universals*.

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Unlike toponymy, semantic universals in general linguistics are frequently investigated. David Crystal provides the following definition for a universal – it is a property that is claimed to be common for all languages (Crystal 2008: 504). A semantic universal, in his opinion, is one of substantive universals along with phonological, syntactic, and the others. Anna Wierzbicka considers that for identifying semantic universals, it is enough to find common concepts in several languages (Wierzbicka 1996: 13). In this paper, a semantic universal is considered to be common semantic derivational models of names in several languages.

Although metonymy is considered to be the main process of formation of proper names (Brozović Roncević and Žic Fuchs 2005: 34; after Ullman 1962), semantic universals in toponymy as a whole seem to appear mainly through metaphorization. According to the origin of languages, semantic universals could be subdivided into three levels:

- the first level includes semantic universals of language groups (for example, there are many common derivational models of place names in Baltic languages, such as bog names derived from words denoting food (e.g. Baltic: food ↔ swamp: Latvian *ļuga* ‘smooth swamp : porridge, beer’, *duļķe* ‘swamp, pool : cloudy drink’, Lithuanian *makōnė* ‘bog : porridge’, *marmalas* ‘swamp : soup’). Baltic semantic universals have been investigated by the Russian linguist Lidiya Nevskaja (1977: 126);

- the second level contains language family semantic universals which can be found through the etymon of the name (e.g. there are many place names derived from words denoting colors in Indo-European languages: Latvian *rūda* ‘marsh < red’, Ukrainian *рудйна* ‘swampy pasture < red’, *рудá* ‘logged swamp < red’, Polish *ruda*, *reda* ‘swamp < red’, Slovak *ruda*, *rudačka* ‘red soil’, etc. (Tolstoj 1959: 188-189, Nevskaja 1977: 109);
- the third level is made of international or absolute semantic universals that occur in languages of different language families (body part ↔ physiographic object, household object ↔ physiographic object).¹

In this paper, the utterance of the third level semantic universals – the most widespread principles of naming, respectively, place names derived from words denoting body parts and utilitarian objects in the Latvian language – are observed. These two groups of semantic correlations between different semantic fields are the most widespread in Latvian toponymy (see Figure 2); they are also approved in world linguistics and geography and this process (body part or utilitarian object → place name) is considered to be an Indo-European semantic formula (Burrill 1945, Nevskaja 1977, Kagami 2010, Murzaev 1974, Toporov 1971, Wierzbicka 1996, etc.).

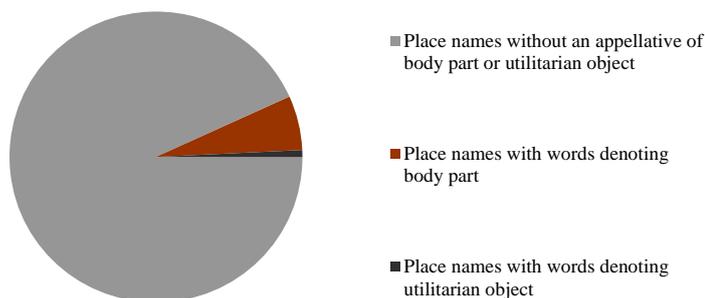


Fig. 1. Place names with words denoting body parts or household objects

Names derived from appellatives of **body parts** constitute a large proportion in toponymy of every nation – it is assumed that typically they make five percent of the total number of any toponymicon. Among metaphorical names, they take the first place not only in frequency, but also in distribution. That is why Anna Wierzbicka considers the correlation ‘body parts – national environment’ as being one of the most widespread concrete concepts (Wierzbicka 1996: 218). Furthermore, they are considered to be witnesses of archetypical concepts of land as a living being, therefore an investigation of place names should begin with the investigation of body part appellatives that have been transformed into place names or toponyms. Indeed, in many nations one can find stories about demiurges – usually mythical creatures – whose bodies have been transformed into parts of land. For example, the Hindu believed that land and its relief was created from Brahma’s body, the Old Slavonics

¹ The boundaries of each group can not be definite – deeper research could prove that semantic universals of the first and second levels are much broader and, thus, should be called international semantic universals.

considered land as body of Rod, the Caucasians believed that the relief has created their God Tha, and the Poetic Edda of the Icelanders tells about Ymir who formed the whole landscape, e.g.:

‘From Ymir's flesh the earth was formed,
and from his bones the hills,
the heaven from the skull of that ice-cold giant,
and from his blood the sea.’ (Thorpe 1866: 14)

In most of the tales, the land of Latvia has formed from the body of a devil, an animal, or young women. It is quite possible that exactly this concept created correlations between place names and words denoting body parts. Therefore, place names that have an etymon of anthropomorphic origin are considered to be the most ancient and a part of the Indo-European semantic formula. In spite of this opinion, place names derived from words denoting body parts in the Latvian toponymy have been investigated only in a few cases. However, researchers of other countries (especially in Russian onomastics) have drawn attention to the place names derived from anatomical terms (Nevskaja 1977, Murzaev 1974, Kagami 2010).

It is difficult to assess the actual number of place names which are derived from anatomical terms. They have entered Latvian toponymy through different routes: most of them are of Latvian, and respectively of Baltic origin, but many borrowed geographical nouns in place names have had anatomical origin in the donor languages (compare, e.g. the productive topoforant – borrowing from Finno-Ugric *selga*, which in Latvian means ‘open sea’, but in Livonian *sālga* – also ‘back’ (Kettunen 1938: 393)).

Analyzing onomastic word groups, compounds, and narrators’ commentaries in 65,000 compound names of the card file of the Latvian Language Institute, about 4,000 onomastic word groups with anatomical geographical terms and 500 compound place names with a utilitarian object name were found. According to the facts of the card file, 40 body part designations are used as physiographic name (93 anatomical terms of the Latvian standard language were searched). A similar number of anatomical terms is used in toponymy of other countries (Murzaev 1974: 127-132).

In the category of geographical object, place names derived from anatomical terms can be divided into three groups:²

- terms that describe the relief – rising grounds (*mugura*³, *kukurs*, *kaupre*, *kauburs*, *kuprs* ‘back’, *galva* ‘head’, *piere* ‘forehead’, *pauris* ‘top of the head’, *pakausis* ‘back of the head’, *kauls* ‘bone’, *krūts* ‘breast’) or relief reduction (*dibens* ‘bottom’, *rīkle* ‘throat’, etc.),
- terms that describe the location of the object plane (*aste* ‘tail’, *kāja* ‘leg’, *mēle* ‘tongue’, *mute* ‘mouth’, *rags* ‘horn’, *šekums* ‘perineum’),
- hydrographical terms (*acs* ‘eye’).

² Topographical meanings of anatomical term are deduced from correlation between place name (meaning of the appellative) and category of geographical object.

³ Lexemes here and further are presented in order of decreasing frequency.

The first group – namely, anatomical relief names – designate mainly elevations. The most widespread anatomical lexemes in Latvian relief names are those with the meaning ‘back’ – *mugura* ‘hogback, hill spine : human or animal back’. This word still keeps topographical meaning not only in place names, but also in the standard language and it has been accepted as a geographical term. It is used in Latvian toponymy to denote the upper part of hill that looks like the back of a living being – usually the back of an animal. In most cases it is used with the lexeme *āzis* ‘he-goat’, for example, hill *Āža mugura* ‘Back of He-goat’, hill *Cūkmugura* ‘Back of Pig’. Designations of ‘back’ have topographical meaning also in other languages: for example, *raxis* in Greece, *dorsum* in Latin, *nugara* in Lithuanian, *xpeбem* in Russian, *nyппy* in Mongolian, etc.

Words denoting the part of back such as *kukurs*, *kaupre*, *kauburs*, *kuprs* (e.g., hills *Priežu Kaupre* ‘Hump of Pines’, *Kaupris* ‘Hump’ hill, *Velna kupris* ‘Devil’s Hump’) which mean ‘a top of the hill, small elevation of relief: hump of the back’ have similar phonetic substance and probably have developed from the Indo-European root **keu-* that means ‘to bend, to curve’. Words of the same origin with anatomical or topographical meaning can be found also in other Indo-European languages: Lithuanian *kuprà*, *kauprė*, Old English *hofer*, etc. Therefore, probably, we should make a distinction between semantic universals of that kind from others and call them lexico-semantic universals. In order to differentiate these two kinds of semantic universals, terms *conceptual semantic universals* and *lexico-semantic universals* should be used. In the first case, a semantic formula – concept ‘body parts stands for environment’ – is used, in the second case, concrete phonetic substance with concrete semantic meaning is used to form two meanings of words of the same origin. In the first case, different body part appellatives of different origin could be used to denote different geographical objects – words denoting body parts can refer to different geographical objects (for example, head as hill in Latvian and head as the source of river in the Slavonic languages).

Relief elevation is also often expressed with lexemes which denote a head of a living being or its parts: *galva* ‘hill : head’, *pakausis* ‘hill, top of hill : back of head’, *pauris* ‘hill, top of hill : back of head’, *piere* ‘slope of hill : forehead’, *kauss*, *galvaskauss* ‘hill : skull’ (e.g. hills *Kazas galva* ‘Head of Goat’, *Nabaga pakausis* ‘Back of the head of Beggar’ hillock, *Pauris* ‘Back of head’). This group of lexemes shows how metaphorically precise the naming by semantic universals is: *forehead* in place names always designates objects without or with poor flora, names of *back of the head* usually are given to the very top of the object. Lexemes with meaning ‘head’ are not very widespread in Latvian toponymy and through the metonymic transposition are included in meadow or forest names. Probably, that is why the topographical meaning of these lexemes in place names has survived to the present day, but disappeared from dictionaries of standard language. Correlation *head – hill* also could be called the Baltic conceptual universal, because, in other languages (e.g. Bulgarian, English, Turkic), *head* often denotes the source of a river or stream, not the elevation of relief (Murzaev 1974: 134).

Lexemes which denote small objects are often semantically transposed, that is, they are included into names of a much wider territory. The lexeme *kauls* ‘bone’ designates underwater rocks or stones, as well as hills in Latvian place names, e.g. underwater rock *Baltais kauls*, *Puntes kauls* or ‘White Bone’ and ‘Punte’s Bone’ in the river Daugava, ford

Rēznas kauls or ‘Rēzna’s Bone’ in river, etc. As a warning landmark, it is used rather frequently, while words denoting other small objects as well as body parts (such as *pumpa* ‘mound : pimple’, *auss* ‘forest : ear’, *zobs* ‘elevation : tooth’) occur only in several place names. Like in the body of a living being, also in nature *bone* remains invisible, surrounded by water or deep forest.

Among lexemes of small body parts and small geographical objects, the most widespread is *krūts* ‘mound : breast’ (e.g. *Garsila krūte* ‘Breast of Long Forest’, *Kalna krūte* ‘Breast of Hill’ – part of the *Garais kalns* ‘Longhill’). However, this lexeme with a topographical meaning appears only in Eastern Latvia, which has a stronger influence of Slavonic languages (compare Slavonic generic elements with meaning ‘land elevation’ derived from Indo-European root **krāu-* : **krū-*). It seems that, in this case, we can speak rather about syncretism of anatomical and topographical names, than semantic universals. Due to smallness of the designated object, this appellative through metonymization is used in place names of broader territories, moreover – appellatives which designate small objects are used to derive new lexemes (e.g. meadow with mounds *Krūtaine* < *krūts* + suff. *-aine* ‘[place where many *krūts* ‘breasts’ are]’).

Only two body part designations are used in place names denoting land depression – *dibens* ‘bottom of valey : hydrographic object or butt’ (e.g. *Bļudodas dibens* ‘Bottom of Bowl’, field *Meždibens* ‘Buttocks of Forest’, forest *Rāceņdibins* ‘Rāceņi’ [oikonym] ‘Buttocks’) and *rīkle* ‘cave : throat’ (e.g. swampy place *Pūra rīkle* ‘Throat of Swamp; between two meadows’, narrow river *Andža rīklīte* ‘Throat of Andžs [anthroponym]’), but they are one of the few words that have preserved topographical meaning also in standard Latvian. They both have additional semes in their semantic field – lexeme *dibens* can refer also to distant places or objects that could not be easily reached – for example, depths of the forest, out-of-the-way places, etc., but word *rīkle* can be included in place names of river entries. Correlation ‘low – wet’ is considered to be a Baltic universal (Nevskaja 1977). It helps to make a transition between different object groups into place names.

The second group of toponyms with body part appellatives designates objects that are long or formed in a particular shape. The number of these lexemes is smaller, but the distribution in place names is much wider. It is probably due to the Latvian terrain in which objects can be more easily described and found by object layout not by relief.

For describing the layout of a place, usually lower body part names are chosen. The most widespread anatomical lexeme not only in this group, but also in the whole Latvian toponymy is *aste* ‘tail’, which is used mainly in place names of the West Latvia and in the deep Livonian dialects of Latvian (e.g. long meadow in a forest *Garā aste* ‘Long Tail’, narrow, long meadow in forest *Vilkaste* ‘Wolf’s Tail’, swampy forest *Poraste* ‘Tail of the Swamp’). Topographical meaning of the lexeme *aste* does not occur in standard Latvian, but the analysis of Latvian compound names and narrators’ commentaries shows eight shades of meaning or semes of lexeme *aste*: ‘long’, ‘narrow’, ‘small’, ‘distant, at the end of something’, ‘worthless, with bad flora’, ‘overgrown, scrubby’, ‘jutting into other landscape’, ‘meandering, snaky’. It indicates that words denoting body parts can bring a very wide set of meanings into a place name.

The similar meaning nuances in place names are also brought by lexemes *kāja* ‘leg’, *rags* ‘horn’, and *mēle* ‘tongue’ – they usually denote objects which are ‘long, narrow, small,

snaky, often worthless, overgrown part of a landscape that stretches into other kind of landscape' (swampy pasture surrounded by pine forests *Purkāja* 'Swamp Leg', meadow along the marsh, narrow – like boot *Zaķkāja* 'Hare's Leg', narrow, long forest *Bukurags* 'Deer Buck's Horn', longish pond *Medusmēle* 'Honey Tongue'). Two lexemes – *šekums* 'perineum' and *elkonis* 'elbow' denote bend or branching of the object and are used sporadically (distributary *Šekums* 'Pelvis', branched ravine *Šekumgrava* 'Ravine of Pelvis', bend of road *Elkonis* 'Elbow').

In the third group – hydrographical names of anatomical origin – there are only two body part appellatives that can refer to hydrographical objects. They are *acs* 'eye' and *vēders* 'stomach'. The first one is often used in marsh pools, ponds and well names (e.g. pools in the marsh *Gāgas purva acis* 'Eyes of Gāgas Swamp', lake *Lielā ace* 'Big Eye', spring *Salas acs* 'Island Eye'), but the second one – in pond and lake names as well as in names that denote rank swamp or meadow with little river or rivulet (pond *Kazas vēders* 'Goat Belly').

Only the appellative *pēda* 'foot' in Latvian place names remains outside of these three groups, because, in spite of its productivity, it does not denote one, single kind of an object, but it is included in a type of subordinate word-group – *vella pēda* (e.g. pit *Vella pēda* 'Devil's foot', stone, 'brought by devil' *Vellapēda* 'Devil's foot'). It has appeared in Latvian toponymy because of a very widespread folk story about paths of a fooled devil.

The second type of semantic universals in Latvian toponymy – words denoting **utilitarian objects** in place names is not very varied – only six productive appellatives were found: *gulta* 'bed', *abra*, *mulda* 'kneading trough', *bloda* 'bowl', *krāsns* 'oven', *laiva* 'boat'. All these lexemes denote relief depressions – usually valleys, pits, water beds (cave *Velna Krāsns* 'Devil's Oven', valley which looks like bowl *Sidraba Bloda* 'Silver Bowl', narrow valley *Abriņa* 'Little Kneading Trough', valley *Laivas grava* 'Ravine of Boat', old riverbed *Abavgulta* 'Bed of Abava [hydronym]'). While in other languages utilitarian object names are used to describe also elevations (see, for example, Murzaev 1974: 126-135), Latvian names of utilitarian objects are used to denote mainly land depressions.

Although words of utilitarian objects in place names are rare, they should be mentioned in order to show metaphorical, not archetypical semantic universals. Describing the motivation of these names, all narrators emphasize the external similarity to the utilitarian object, while names with appellatives of body parts are crowned with legends and tales. This principle of metaphorical naming has even created a special toponymical genitive in Latvian toponymy which cannot be found in the everyday language. In the Latvian standard language, this genitive case expresses possession – although this meaning of the case occurs also in place names, additionally the meaning of comparison which is not used in the common language can be found. For example, the place name *Laivas grava* cannot be translated as 'Ravine of Boat', namely, 'a ravine which belongs to a boat', but as 'a ravine that looks like a boat'.

Other body part and utilitarian object appellatives which were not mentioned in this paper, occur sporadically in Latvian toponymy, therefore we could not deduce many conclusive regularities. But it is clear that every body part appellative brings into a place name the main concept of the body part's role in the living being or the shape. Thus, *hearts* and *navels* in the Latvian toponymy usually are central objects of the areal, *fingers* and *fingernails* are small meadows with bad flora, *living rooms* are open area in forests, *mouthes*

are places were water flows, *et cetera*. It proves that, in most cases, words without topographical meaning have come into place names through metaphorical transposition – objects are named by similarity. However, it is impossible to find out which meaning arose earlier – the topographical or anatomical meaning. Two different opinions have appeared – some toponymists (e.g. Nevskaja 1977: 163) consider that body part appellatives in place names are the result of syncretism (it means, both meanings have appeared simultaneously), but others (e.g. Murzaev 1974: 126) think it is based only on a metaphorical shift. But we can never be sure if a topographical meaning of the appellative in a name had formed in everyday language or only in the place naming process.

What kinds of geographical objects are marked by semantic universals analyzed in this paper? In most cases, the anatomical and utilitarian object appellatives in place names mark objects with plain relief (e.g. meadow, morass, forest, field, pasture), in second place there are relief forms (such as mountains, rocks, holes, gullies), in third – hydrographic objects (such as lakes, rivers, ponds). Only the fallow does not obtain a geographical term of anatomic or utilitarian object origin in Latvian Toponymy (see Fig. 2).

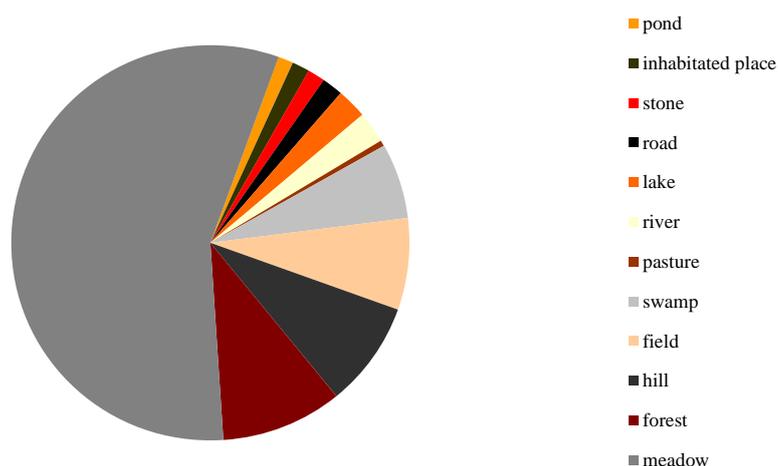


Fig. 2. Objects with names containing anatomic or utilitarian object term

However, the lexicon of the Latvian standard language shows that semantic universals (body part or utilitarian object terms for place name) have a tendency to disappear. For example, in the earlier Latvian bibliographical sources (e.g. Mülenbachs-Endzelīns *Dictionary of the Latvian Language* (Mülenbachs 1923-1932)), topographical meaning has been given to 15 anatomical lexemes, nowadays (e.g. in *Dictionary of the Latvian Standard Language* (LLVV)) only four anatomical terms *dibens* ‘butt’, *mugura* ‘back’, *piere* ‘forehead’, *rags* ‘horn’ keep the topographical meaning (LLVV). The same tendency is found in place names: metaphorical place names increasingly are substituted or specified, or explained by a more common generic element. Thus, many *tails* (*aste*) have changed to *meadows* (*pļava*) or *forests* (*mežs*), *backs* (*mugura*, *kaupre*, *kukurs*, etc.) and *noses* (*deguns*) to *hills* (*kalns*), *eyes* (*acs*) to *wells* (*aka*) or *springs* (*avuots*), etc. Very often epexegetic word groups appear (e.g. the hill *Jura galva* is now *Jura galvas kalniņš* ‘Head of Juris [anthroponym]’ → ‘Hill of

Juris' Head'), *Purkāja – Purkājītums* ('Swamp Leg' → 'Field of Swamp Leg', *Paurīte – Paurītes kalniņš* ('Back of Head' → 'Hill of Back of Head')).

The main conclusion is as follows: the analysis of these semantic universals shows at least three ways of formation of semantic universals – some terms of body parts may have flowed into place names due to archetypical concepts, utilitarian object designations – according to the principles of language formation – by world perception through metaphor, but sometimes they have formed according to folklore or legends. Semantic universals which can be divided, from the point of view of derivation, into *conceptual semantic universals* and *lexico-semantic universals*, help to organize the territory and make the world of place names more colorful and even more accurate.

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