

Toponymy and the challenge of the *border*. Notes for a critical reflection

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Usually considered a specific term related to political geography, with the meaning of “dividing line between two states” (Monkhouse, 1978), the concept of *border* has, however, an etymological basis – as a derivative of the Latin root *FRONT-*, which points to the idea of “to be in front of, “serve as a front to” (The Oxford Universal Dictionary, 1970) – and a semantic projection of a breadth that goes far beyond the geopolitical sense that is primarily attributed to it. As a root concept, therefore, with a broad linguistic anchorage in most Romance languages (and, also, in numerous non-Romance languages), parallel to other concomitant terms, such as *limit* or *confine*, and with a wide range of derived and compound terms formed on the basis of the aforementioned Latin substrate (Coromines, 1979-1991), it is pertinent to ask about its *raison d’être* and about its evolution from an open conceptual perspective attentive to interrelations. Above all, considering that, in an epistemological sense, the concept points to the idea of the delimitation of a reality in relation to another contrasting or differentiated reality (that is, situated “on the other side”, or “in front” of the first). It should be stressed, in this context, that we are not dealing with just any action: on the theoretical level, the act of delimiting (and, therefore, of establishing a border) takes on a particular significance insofar as it contributes in an essential way to the determination of the reality of the thing-in-itself (Ferrater, 2001). Consequently, we can affirm that asking ourselves about the borders (that is, about the “container”) of a given reality is also, ultimately, asking ourselves about the essence of this reality (that is, about its “content”).

Based on the above considerations, and taking into account the sense of *territoriality* (inherent in the spatial nature of the toponym itself), underlined by numerous authors and in a multiplicity of geographical contexts (Vidal de la Blache, 1888-1889; Dorion, 1972; Raffestin, 1980; Sack, 1986; Kadmon, 2001; Turco, 2004; Molchanova, 2007), we propose a reflection on the scope and significance of the idea of *border* in its specific consideration within the field of toponymy. To this end, we start from the premise that the toponym, or geographical name, is situated as a concept at the intersection of three major vectors or fields of knowledge (Dorion and Poirier, 1975): linguistics (to the extent that the name materializes, from the outset, as a linguistic or philological reality), history (since every toponym has an intrinsic historical dimension, or is necessarily inserted in time) and geography (likewise, the notion of toponym is inseparable from the specific space to which it refers, and to which it provides individuality). On the basis described, we propose a discussion that would adopt as its axis the concept of border (which we understand to be applicable, with its own specificities, to each of the three major fields indicated), and which we propose to develop around the following questions:

- a) If toponyms “create” spaces, to the extent that they identify and individualize them in relation to other spaces, can they be considered to establish *borders* between them?
- b) Does the application of different toponyms to geographically adjacent spaces imply any kind of consequence on the territory (for example, of a legal nature), beyond the mere semantic differentiation of the space inherent to the toponym?
- c) To what extent can the philological concept of isogloss (understood as a “dividing line” between two ways of pronouncing a name) be considered, applied to the field of toponymy, as a “primary border”, that is, as an elementary way of differentiating a continuous space?
- d) To what extent can toponymy be considered an effective tool for determining the degree of “differentiation” of one space with respect to another? Does the toponym, in these cases, perform a function comparable to that of a border?
- e) What role can toponymy play in the delimitation of territories affected by historically changing borders? To what extent are these border changes directly reflected in toponymy?

Our final purpose, based on the debate and discussion of the suggested questions, is to raise whether toponymy, which a priori can be considered as a field of knowledge that potentially lies above the barriers (or “borders”) between scientific disciplines, can also aspire to be a kind of “universal language” applied to the territory, with the capacity to interpret

reality from an integrative perspective – and overcoming, in this sense, a perspective strictly subject to a rigid and conventional conception of the idea of border.

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