

# Toponymy as a tool for the geographical interpretation of the region: some methodological foundations

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## Abstract:

Are toponyms the *lynchpin* of geographical communication conducted by means of maps or do they serve a merely informative function in cartography, playing a largely rhetorical, technically secondary, even non-essential role?

Our objective in this discussion is to attempt to provide a response to this question. In so doing, we address the fundamental relationships that exist between a region and its place names, or toponyms, and, on this basis, defend the suitability of the geographical point of view for the study of toponymy. We begin by considering various theoretical aspects of the science of onomastics, in order to contend that geography, linguistics and history are the three basic pillars on which any study of place names with any claim to be holistic must be based (Dorion, 1984); but we argue the need for a fourth: cartography, understood as the ideal vehicle or support for communicating the geographical content of a toponym (Moll and Tort, 1985). We then apply our theoretical approach to a geographical-toponymic study of a region of Catalonia: the district or *comarca* of the Baix Camp, in the province of Tarragona. Our analysis here focuses on a specific type of toponym: the names of settlements. To do so, we start from the premise that the study of the semantics of this toponymy provides – and this applies to any region – qualitative geographical information of the highest order, information that can without hesitation be described as *structural* or strategic (Tort and Sancho, 2014).

In terms of the methodology we adopt, our study can be framed, generically speaking, within the semantic or, more specifically, *onomasiological* field. That is, we approach the study of toponyms, essentially, as “forms of expression”, in multiple senses, of the diversity of places and of the region in general. Hence, here, our decision to focus specifically on settlement toponyms affords us a number of specific advantages which we outline below by way of the premises that can be considered to underpin our general approach.

a) The settlement toponymy of the Baix Camp forms a homogeneous set of names when seen from a regional point of view. This homogeneity (in the sense that all the names in question occupy the same level of spatial significance) allows correlations to be drawn both between many of the region’s toponyms and between the toponyms and the region, and so to avoid the subjectiveness typically associated with certain toponymic categories (for example, the traditional distinction between “major toponymy” and “minor toponymy”).

b) The settlement toponymy has important historical foundations. In Europe as a whole, and in Spain in particular, the settlement toponymy is usually the most ancient and the best documented. The reasons for this are obvious: the settlement – that is, the configuration of human occupancy in the territory – is the “structural support” on which the life of each community is organized. In the case of the Baix Camp, the High Middle Ages (12th–13th centuries), characterized by the colonization following the end of Muslim rule, marks the beginning of a historical sequence at the level of the region’s settlements that, in a certain way, can be traced all the way down to the present day.

c) The toponymy of settlements, because of its importance, has been considered a priority by specialists (above all, by etymologists). Here, we should stress the advantages of being able to consult, with reference to the domain of the Romance languages (which stretches throughout a large part of southern Europe), the onomastic studies of Joan Coromines, a body of work that this author has explored from an eminently geographical perspective (Tort, 2021) and which can be considered as being of fundamental methodological value. Indeed, Coromines’ work provides the scholar of onomastics not only with a systematic set of criteria for approaching etymological problems but also with the tools for establishing a coherent historical-geographical interpretation of the realities of the region.

## References

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