

THE MEANING OF BILINGUAL NAMING IN PUBLIC SPACE FOR THE CULTURAL IDENTITY OF LINGUISTIC MINORITIES

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Abstract: *The meanings of bilingual naming in public space for the cultural identity of linguistic minorities. Among the four main functions of place names in relating man to territory (or communities to geographical space), two are especially important for cultural or linguistic minorities: they often reflect characteristics of space, describing natural characteristics or economic-political characteristics (functions) of a place and highlight in this way aspects that seemed important to the people who named the place; they mark the territory as symbols for appropriation and structure geographical space mentally. The aim of this short paper is to highlight this functional background of bilingual names for the cultural identities of linguistic minorities in the public space.*

Rezumat: *Reprezentarea denumirilor bilingve din spațial public în scopul identității culturale a minorităților lingvistice. În relația omului (sau a comunităților umane) cu spațiul geografic se pot identifica patru caracteristici sau funcții de bază, din care două sunt esențiale pentru minoritățile culturale sau lingvistice: toponimele exprimă caracteristici ale spațiului, atât natural cât și economico-politic, deosebit de important pentru persoanele care l-au numit; numele de locuri marchează teritoriul unei comunități, fiind simboluri pentru locurile din apropiere și forme de structurare a spațiului geografic mental. Rolul acestui articol este de a reda acest cadru funcțional al denumirilor bilingve în relevarea identității culturale a minorităților lingvistice.*

Key words: bilingual, cultural identity, public space, minorities.

Cuvinte cheie: bilingv, identitate culturală, spațiu public, minorități.



1. INTRODUCTION

Among the four main functions of place names in relating man to territory (or communities to geographical space), two are especially important for cultural or linguistic minorities. Let me first briefly mention all the four functions before I go more into detail with these two specific functions.

They often **reflect characteristics of space**. They often describe natural characteristics (location, morphology, waters, vegetation, soils) or economic or political characteristics/functions of a place and highlight in this way aspects that seemed important to the people who named the place. They throw a glance also at the name-giving community, tell a story about this community. Place names may thus be regarded as condensed narratives about this community.

They **mark the territory** of a community. Place names are symbols for appropriation. Who owns a geographical feature or has at least responsibility for a feature has also the right to name it.

Place names **structure geographical space mentally**. They help to subdivide complex spatial reality into features and make this structure communicable. Every geographical feature (in the sense of a subunit of geographical space) is a mental construct. In many cases (e.g. with cultural regions, landscapes like the Banat) the place name is in fact the only identifier of a geographical feature. A landscape exists in fact just due to the name. But it is nevertheless a social reality, it is in everybody's mind, it is a brand. Nobody would say that the Banat does not exist!

Place names **support emotional ties** between man and place and promote in this way space-related identity building. If somebody acquainted to a place reads, mentions or memorizes a place name, this recalls all the contents of a space-related concept with him/her, reminds her/him of sights, persons, events, smells, sounds associated with this place and lets "the feel of a place" arise as Yi-Fu TUAN (1974, 1977) calls it.

2. FUNCTIONS OF PLACE NAMES WITH SPECIAL IMPORTANCE FOR MINORITIES

Two functions are specifically important for minorities: The function of marking the territory of a community and the function of supporting emotional ties.

In areas that are inhabited by more than one socio-cultural community, several communities compete for the public, official designation of a geographical feature. Mostly it is a community dominant in the wider geographical space and a community non-dominant in the wider geographical space, but locally both by number in the majority and dominant in the social and political sense. With their strive for public recognition of their names both communities want this place to be designated as theirs, wish to relate their identities to it and to express that they feel responsible and accountable for this place.

Without conflict between the communities, this is only possible if each of the communities accepts the claim of the other and feels comfortable with a shared or common identity of the place. A conflict – as it has happened and happens in many cases – indicates

that such mutual acceptance is not (sufficiently) given and that the dominant community is not ready to give in or to share.

The dispute over the name (the public signpost) is only an expression of deeper conflict reasons. For the non-dominant community it is usually more important than for the dominant to see its relationship to the place recognized by an official name right because it is the minority and non-dominant and because it is not always obvious for the outside world that it is to be found there.

A minority also requires a higher level of self-assurance. Members of a minority face almost daily the challenge to confess identity. When non-dominant communities strive for the public recognition of their place names, they strive – abstractly formulated – for the symbolic function of marking their territory, for the opportunity of demonstrating their presence, but also for support of their emotional attachment to the place. If a member of a non-dominant community reads the place name in his/her own language on a signpost or on a map, a sense of familiarity develops.

Since only communities established in a place for generations have developed own place names for the features in their surroundings, they regard the public presentation of their geographical names also as an acknowledgment of their presence for generations, as recognition of the fact that their group has helped to shape culture and cultural landscape. It is for this very reason also a wise decision on the side of the dominant community to grant the non-dominant group this right. It will satisfy the non-dominant group, it will promote its sense for cooperation and its loyalty. Having understood this, many countries grant this right to their minorities – since 2001 also Romania (see Photo 1).



Photo 1: *The Romanian place-names law of 2001 supports bi- and multilingual naming on signposts and makes it also possible to render names in non-Roman script, if the endonym is written in this script*

Public rendering of minority place names means for the members of this community in the first line that they can regard this place as theirs, that it is the place of their group. Information to the outside world is just a secondary function. The geographical name in the minority language should therefore be written in the orthography of the minority language, with all the diacritics and special characters. An alienated notation adapted to the pronunciation habits of the majority language does not satisfy this purpose. If linguistic minorities are used to write their names in a script different from the majority, it is for the same reason also appropriate to use this other script and not to convert it. This is, e.g., so practiced since the places-names law of 2001 in Romania, where names of Ukrainian and Russian minorities are reflected on signposts in their respective Cyrillic alphabet. Would they be converted to Roman script, speakers of these languages would regard them as alienated and hardly as their names.

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