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# THE COGNITIVE MODEL OF TOPONYMS AND THE LINGUISTIC WORLDVIEW

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**Abstract:** This article examines the cognitive model of toponyms and its role in shaping the linguistic worldview. In contemporary cognitive linguistics and onomastics, place names are increasingly understood not as arbitrary labels but as linguistically encoded units of spatial knowledge, cultural memory, and collective experience. Drawing on research in cognitive toponymy, linguistic relativity, ethnolinguistics, and cultural semantics, the article argues that toponyms function as conceptual structures linking language, cognition, and territory. The paper develops a theoretical account of the cognitive architecture of toponyms, explores their role in mental mapping and ethnocultural categorization, and shows how place names preserve culturally specific interpretations of space. The analysis demonstrates that toponyms contribute to the linguistic worldview by organizing environmental knowledge, indexing historical identity, and transmitting value-laden perceptions of place. The article follows a theoretical-synthetic methodology and uses recent scholarship in cognitive and linguocultural approaches to toponymy.

**Keywords:** toponymy, cognitive linguistics, linguistic worldview, onomastics, spatial cognition, ethnolinguistics, place names

**Introduction**. Toponyms occupy a special position in the lexicon because they identify geographical entities while also preserving traces of cultural interpretation, historical memory, and spatial experience. In recent scholarship, place names have been treated as meaningful linguistic formations connected with conceptualization, environmental perception, and collective cognition [1], [2]. This shift from purely descriptive or etymological treatments toward cognitive and linguocultural interpretations has opened new directions in toponymic research.

The linguistic worldview may be broadly understood as the verbalized model of reality encoded in language through the interaction of cognition, culture, and lived experience. Within this framework, toponyms are important because they reflect how a community segments space, assigns salience to environmental features, and embeds values in geographical naming practices [2], [3]. A place name therefore functions not only as a locator but also as a compressed representation of what a speech community notices, remembers, and transmits about a landscape.

The aim of this article is to explain the cognitive model of toponyms and to show how this model contributes to the formation of the linguistic worldview. The article argues that toponyms should be analyzed as multi-layered cognitive units comprising referential, semantic, conceptual, encyclopedic, and axiological dimensions. Such an approach allows a more precise account of the relationship between naming, spatial cognition, and national-cultural identity.

**Theoretical Foundations**. The cognitive study of language starts from the premise that language is not merely a neutral instrument for transmitting information, but a means of structuring and storing knowledge. Within this perspective, proper names, including place names, participate in

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conceptual organization and reflect the ways in which human beings interpret reality [2], [4]. Toponymy, therefore, can be approached not only as a branch of historical linguistics or geography, but also as an interface discipline connecting cognition, culture, and language.

A central idea in cognitive toponymy is that place names are embedded in mental representation. Reszegi argues that toponyms are connected to cognitive maps and spatial representations, and that they form part of the mental lexicon through networks of linguistic and encyclopedic knowledge [1]. This means that a toponym activates not only a geographical referent but also a body of remembered, imagined, and culturally mediated information associated with a place. In this sense, toponyms operate as cognitive nodes rather than simple labels.

Another important development in the field is the emergence of the term *cognitive toponymy*. Martynenko discusses the need for this term within onomastic theory and emphasizes that the analysis of place names should include mental representation, conceptual structures, and the interaction between language and spatial knowledge [5]. Such an approach expands the scope of toponymy beyond etymology and classification and allows researchers to investigate how place names encode cultural models of the world.

From a linguocultural point of view, toponyms are regarded as repositories of ethnocultural meanings. Smatova, Tleuberdiev, and Omarov demonstrate that Kazakh and English toponyms reflect distinct historical, environmental, and cultural conditions, and that their semantic organization reveals deeper features of national worldviews [2]. Their work reinforces the idea that the toponymic picture of the world is shaped by concepts, cultural codes, and collective stereotypes embedded in naming traditions.

**The Cognitive Model of Toponyms**. A cognitive model of toponyms can be organized around several interrelated components. The first is the **referential component**, which links the linguistic form to a concrete geographical object. Without this dimension, a toponym would not perform its basic identifying function. However, referentiality alone cannot explain the semantic richness of place names or their role in shaping worldview [1].

The second is the **semantic-motivational component**. Many toponyms originate in salient features of the environment, including terrain, vegetation, fauna, hydrology, color, settlement type, ownership, or social function. In descriptive naming traditions, the motivational basis of a toponym often remains visible and contributes directly to interpretation [1], [6]. Even when names become semantically opaque over time, traces of original motivation may remain relevant for etymological and cultural analysis.

The third is the **conceptual component**, which places the toponym within a broader system of spatial and cultural categories. A place name may activate concepts such as *village*, *homeland*, *river*, *hill*, *steppe*, or *forest*, each of which carries language-specific and culture-specific associations [2], [7]. This component is crucial because it links individual names to collective patterns of categorization.

The fourth is the **encyclopedic component**. Cognitive linguistics assumes that the meaning of a linguistic unit cannot be separated from background knowledge. In the case of toponyms, this knowledge includes geography, history, myths, social practices, migration routes, economic functions, and political symbolism [1], [8]. Some place names preserve narratives of settlement, conquest, religious significance, or ecological adaptation that far exceed their nominative role.

The fifth is the **axiological component**, which concerns cultural evaluation. Place names may encode ideas of sacredness, danger, fertility, remoteness, prestige, origin, or belonging. These evaluative dimensions are not accidental additions to meaning; they are part of how communities turn physical space into culturally significant space [2], [7]. Thus, toponyms can reveal how a landscape is valued, feared, idealized, or emotionally appropriated.

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Taken together, these five dimensions show that a toponym is best understood as a complex cognitive structure. It combines the identification of place with layers of perception, interpretation, and cultural memory. This model provides a stronger explanatory framework than approaches that reduce place names to phonological forms, etymologies, or map labels.

**Toponyms and Spatial Cognition**. The relationship between toponyms and spatial cognition has become one of the most productive topics in cognitive onomastics. Reszegi defines the cognitive map as the organization of spatial relations in the mind and shows that toponyms are closely related to this map because they connect linguistic knowledge with spatial orientation and environmental representation [1]. The role of toponyms in cognition is therefore tied to both memory and navigation.

In modern societies, cognitive maps are often incomplete and highly selective. People tend to know relatively few place names beyond central urban and residential zones, and many of the names they know are semantically opaque [1]. As a result, the identifying function of the toponym becomes more salient than its descriptive or orientational value. In such contexts, place names often function as labels attached to already known spaces rather than as active guides to spatial reasoning.

In traditional and indigenous societies, however, the cognitive role of toponyms may be much stronger. Reszegi reviews anthropological findings showing that in many traditional communities descriptive place names serve as mnemonic aids, orientation tools, and carriers of environmental knowledge [1]. In these settings, a place name is more likely to be integrated into practical navigation, storytelling, ritual discourse, and intergenerational knowledge transfer.

Studies on oral mapping and indigenous navigation further support this claim. Research cited by Reszegi shows that among groups such as the Navajo and the Sami, toponyms are embedded in narratives and route descriptions that structure movement through the environment [1]. In such cases, place names are not secondary linguistic tags but central elements in the organization of cognitive space.

The contrast between modern and traditional naming environments suggests that the cognitive force of toponyms depends partly on the transparency of the naming system and partly on the community's relationship with the landscape. Where naming practices are semantically rich and ecologically grounded, toponyms contribute more directly to perception and orientation. Where names are opaque and detached from everyday interaction with land, their cognitive role shifts toward symbolic indexing and administrative identification.

**Toponyms and the Linguistic Worldview**

The linguistic worldview is reflected in toponyms because place names encode culturally preferred ways of perceiving and categorizing space. Smatova and colleagues show that the toponymic picture of the world is characterized by concepts and stereotypes that emerge through national history, spiritual culture, and collective cognition [2]. This means that toponyms are part of the broader process by which language verbalizes an ethnic group's understanding of reality.

A particularly illuminating example is the Kazakh concept of *auyl* 'village'. According to Smatova et al., this concept is not limited to the idea of settlement. It also carries meanings such as homeland, kinship center, ancestral continuity, and emotional belonging [2]. Place names built around such concepts therefore preserve an entire worldview in condensed linguistic form.

The concept of *atameken* 'ancestral homeland' provides another example. In Kazakh, this notion links land to genealogy, national memory, and spiritual identity, while comparable English place-name patterns often foreground settlement, ownership, or topographical location [2]. This difference does not imply that one language is more culturally rich than another; rather, it shows that each naming tradition highlights different aspects of human relation to space.

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The concept of *dala* 'steppe' also reveals how landscape can become a worldview category. In the Kazakh tradition, the steppe is associated with openness, mobility, freedom, and historical continuity [2]. The recurrence of such concepts in toponymy demonstrates how a community's ecological and social experience is transformed into linguistic structure.

English toponymy reflects a different but equally systematic worldview. The frequency of elements such as *-ton*, *-ham*, *-by*, *-stead*, and *-wold* points to a historically rooted concern with habitation, enclosure, pasture, and rural settlement [2], [9], [10]. These patterns show how English place naming has been shaped by agrarian organization, settlement structure, and layered historical contact among Old English, Norse, and other traditions.

Thus, the linguistic worldview is not confined to metaphor, phraseology, or grammar. It is also crystallized in proper names, especially place names. Toponyms preserve a society's ecological priorities, historical memories, and symbolic geographies within the naming system itself.

**Ethnocultural and Comparative Dimensions**

Comparative toponymy reveals both universal and culture-specific dimensions of naming. Across languages, people tend to name places after visible features such as water, hills, trees, settlement types, and routes. This suggests that human perception provides a common basis for place naming [1], [7]. Yet the selection of salient features and the cultural meanings attached to them vary significantly between communities.

For example, Smatova et al. show that Kazakh toponyms strongly reflect nomadic history, pastoral life, and spatial relations within steppe ecology, whereas English toponyms often foreground fixed habitation, enclosure, and territorial organization [2]. These differences correspond to broader contrasts in lifestyle, economy, and historical development. Place naming therefore becomes a window into ethnocultural cognition.

Recent work on metaphorical place names deepens this perspective. Studies of microtoponyms in Turkic contexts suggest that some place names function as compressed cognitive frames and conceptual metaphors rather than purely descriptive expressions [7]. Metaphorical mappings such as Place is Person or Place is Animal reveal how imaginative cognition contributes to the organization of geographical knowledge. This also strengthens the link between toponymy and the linguistic worldview.

Opaque place names present a further comparative challenge. Garcia-Quera argues that the etymology of opaque toponyms requires a cognitive and interdisciplinary method because traditional approaches may overlook geographical, conceptual, and cultural factors [8]. Her work highlights the importance of reconstructing not only the historical form of a name but also the conceptual logic that may have motivated its emergence.

These comparative findings suggest that the cognitive model of toponyms must account for universal cognitive mechanisms alongside local cultural codes. Toponyms are shaped by general processes of attention, categorization, memory, and association, but the resulting naming systems are filtered through ethnolinguistic experience.

**Toponyms, Identity, and Memory**

Place names also play a major role in identity formation. They connect individuals and communities to territories, histories, and symbolic centers of belonging. This function is especially visible in names associated with ancestral homeland, sacred sites, frontier zones, and politically significant locations [1], [2]. Through such names, geography becomes part of collective self-understanding.

Memory is crucial here. A toponym can preserve traces of extinct practices, older forms of settlement, forgotten environmental features, or past linguistic layers. Even when speakers no longer

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know the etymology of a name, the toponym may remain a durable marker of historical continuity [8], [10]. In this way, place names serve as linguistic monuments embedded in everyday usage.

Toponyms may also become sites of ideological contestation. Renaming, preservation campaigns, and the loss of indigenous place names demonstrate that toponymy is not only cognitive but also political. Karayeva and Meirbekov, for instance, discuss the risk of losing traditional toponyms under the pressure of dominant languages and cultures, showing that place-name change can threaten cultural continuity and historical memory [11].

The preservation of toponymic heritage is therefore more than an antiquarian task. It is part of protecting the conceptual and symbolic resources through which communities interpret their world. The erosion of place names can lead to the erosion of locally grounded worldviews.

**Discussion**. The evidence reviewed in this article supports a cognitive-linguistic interpretation of toponyms. Place names are best understood as complex units that combine reference, conceptualization, memory, cultural knowledge, and evaluation. This conclusion moves beyond narrower views that treat toponyms as marginal elements of vocabulary or as merely administrative conventions [1], [5].

The proposed cognitive model also supports a moderate form of linguistic relativity. Reszegi suggests that the name model available to speakers is partly language- and culture-dependent, and that this model influences how spatial knowledge is structured [1]. In other words, naming traditions do not determine thought in an absolute sense, but they shape expectations about what kinds of information place names are likely to encode.

This perspective has implications for further research. First, cognitive toponymy should be connected more explicitly with frame semantics, conceptual metaphor theory, and ethnolinguistic studies. Second, comparative work is needed to identify how different naming systems encode center-periphery relations, sacred geographies, ecological adaptation, and national memory. Third, the study of contemporary urban naming practices may reveal how modern mobility, digitization, and globalization transform the cognitive role of place names.

The article also suggests a methodological implication. A full analysis of a toponym should not stop at its etymology. It should include semantic transparency, conceptual category, cultural narrative, spatial function, and axiological potential. Only then can researchers adequately explain how toponyms contribute to the linguistic worldview.

**Conclusion**. The cognitive model of toponyms provides a productive framework for understanding the relationship between place names and the linguistic worldview. Toponyms are not simple labels attached to pre-existing locations. They are complex linguistic formations through which communities categorize space, encode cultural values, preserve memory, and organize environmental knowledge [1], [2]. By integrating referential, semantic, conceptual, encyclopedic, and axiological dimensions, the cognitive model explains why place names remain central to both cognition and culture. Through toponyms, landscapes are interpreted rather than merely designated. This interpretive function makes toponymy a key domain for the study of language as a form of world-construction.

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