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TERRITORIAL SPECIFICITY OF FRENCH MICRO-HYDRONYMS

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Abstract: Micro-hydronyms constitute an important category of toponyms that designate small water bodies such as streams, springs, brooks, ponds, and minor rivers. In France, micro-hydronyms reflect the linguistic, geographical, historical, and cultural diversity of the country's regions. The study of French micro-hydronyms reveals valuable information about local landscapes, settlement history, and regional linguistic traditions. This article examines the territorial specificity of French micro-hydronyms by analyzing their geographical distribution, linguistic origins, semantic characteristics, and cultural significance. Particular attention is given to the influence of regional languages and natural environments on the formation and preservation of these names.

Keywords: micro-hydronyms, toponymy, French geography, territorial specificity, regional languages, hydronymy, linguistic landscape.

Introduction. Toponymy, the study of geographical names, occupies an important place in linguistic and geographical research. Among various categories of toponyms, hydronyms represent names associated with water bodies. While major rivers such as the Seine, Loire, Rhône, and Garonne have attracted considerable scholarly attention, micro-hydronyms remain less explored despite their significant linguistic and cultural value. French micro-hydronyms designate small-scale water features that are closely connected to local communities. These names often preserve ancient linguistic elements that have disappeared from everyday language. They also reflect specific environmental characteristics and provide evidence of historical settlement patterns. The territorial specificity of French micro-hydronyms is particularly evident in regions where local languages and dialects have influenced naming practices. The objective of this article is to analyze the territorial characteristics of French micro-hydronyms and to identify the factors that contribute to their regional diversity.

Theoretical Background. Hydronymy is considered one of the oldest layers of toponymy because names of water bodies tend to remain stable over long periods. According to toponymic studies, hydronyms often survive linguistic changes and preserve traces of ancient populations and languages.

Micro-hydronyms differ from macro-hydronyms in scale and function. While macro-hydronyms generally designate major rivers and lakes known nationally or internationally, micro-hydronyms are primarily used within local communities. Their formation is influenced by immediate geographical surroundings and local linguistic traditions. French territory presents a unique environment for hydronymic research due to the coexistence of several linguistic traditions, including French, Occitan, Breton, Basque, Alsatian, Corsican, and Franco-Provençal. As a result, micro-hydronyms display remarkable territorial diversity. **Geographical Distribution of French Micro-Hydronyms.** The geographical distribution of micro-hydronyms in France corresponds closely to the country’s varied physical landscape. Mountainous regions, coastal areas, plains, and river valleys each exhibit distinctive naming patterns. In the French Alps and the Pyrenees, micro-hydronyms frequently refer to springs, mountain streams, and glacial waters. Names often emphasize characteristics such as altitude, speed of flow, temperature, or clarity of water. Examples include names containing elements meaning

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"cold," "rapid," or "rocky." In western France, particularly in Brittany, many micro-hydronyms derive from Celtic linguistic traditions. Breton influences can be observed in numerous names associated with streams and coastal watercourses. These names often preserve ancient Celtic roots related to water, marshes, and springs.

Southern France presents a different picture. Occitan-speaking regions contain numerous micro-hydronyms derived from Occitan vocabulary. Such names frequently describe seasonal streams, known locally as watercourses that may dry up during summer periods. This reflects the Mediterranean climate of the region. In northern France, micro-hydronyms tend to be influenced by Old French, Germanic, and Latin linguistic elements. The names often emphasize agricultural functions, drainage systems, and the relationship between water resources and human settlements.

Linguistic Origins and Regional Diversity. One of the most remarkable aspects of French micro-hydronyms is their linguistic diversity. Many names originate from pre-Roman languages, while others derive from Latin, Germanic, Celtic, or regional Romance languages.

Celtic Influence. Celtic influence is particularly visible in Brittany. Numerous micro-hydronyms contain elements associated with ancient Celtic words for water, river, spring, or marshland. These names demonstrate the continuity of Celtic linguistic heritage in western France.

Latin Heritage. Roman occupation introduced Latin vocabulary that significantly influenced hydronymic naming. Many micro-hydronyms contain Latin-derived roots referring to springs, fountains, and flowing water. These names became integrated into local dialects and later into standard French.

Germanic Contributions. Germanic influence is most noticeable in northeastern France. Historical settlement by Frankish and other Germanic peoples contributed vocabulary associated with streams, wetlands, and watercourses. Some micro-hydronyms preserve Germanic lexical elements that are no longer commonly used.

Regional Languages. Regional languages have played a crucial role in shaping local hydronymy. Occitan, Basque, Breton, Corsican, and Alsatian linguistic traditions contributed unique naming patterns reflecting local environmental conditions and cultural practices. The coexistence of these linguistic influences explains the extraordinary territorial variation observed among French micro-hydronyms.

Semantic Characteristics of French Micro-Hydronyms. French micro-hydronyms often describe specific physical characteristics of water bodies. Their semantic structure can generally be classified into several categories.

Physical Properties. Many names refer to observable features such as: Water color; Water temperature; Flow speed; Depth; Water clarity. Examples include names meaning "clear stream," "cold spring," or "dark brook."

Topographical Features. Another group of micro-hydronyms describes the surrounding landscape. These names may indicate valleys, forests, rocks, meadows, or mountains associated with the water body.

Flora and Fauna. Numerous names derive from local vegetation or animal species. Watercourses located near oak forests, willow trees, or habitats of specific animals frequently receive corresponding names.

Human Activities. Some micro-hydronyms reflect economic and social activities. They may refer to mills, irrigation systems, fishing locations, or agricultural practices. Such names provide valuable information about historical land use.

Cultural and Historical Significance. Micro-hydronyms constitute an essential element of local cultural heritage. They preserve collective memory and contribute to regional identity. In many rural

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communities, traditional names continue to be used despite administrative standardization. These names also provide evidence of historical settlement patterns. Through the study of micro-hydronyms, researchers can reconstruct aspects of ancient landscapes, migration processes, and linguistic evolution. Furthermore, micro-hydronyms play an important role in environmental history. They often indicate former wetlands, extinct springs, or watercourses that have changed due to human intervention. Consequently, they represent valuable sources for interdisciplinary research involving linguistics, geography, history, and ecology.

Conclusion. French micro-hydronyms represent a rich and diverse component of the country's toponymic heritage. Their territorial specificity reflects the interaction between natural environments, historical developments, and linguistic traditions. Regional diversity in micro-hydronymic naming demonstrates the influence of Celtic, Latin, Germanic, and regional linguistic heritage across France. The study of French micro-hydronyms contributes not only to linguistic and toponymic research but also to a broader understanding of cultural landscapes and regional identities. Future research should focus on the creation of comprehensive databases and comparative analyses of micro-hydronymic systems in different regions of France.

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