On homonymy and polysemy in place-names
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Abstract

The linguistic term *homonymy* is used within toponomastics to refer to place-names with the same modern form but different origins. Examples include Oxton, Newton and Maryburgh in various parts of the British Isles, and Cambridge in various parts of the world. However, homonymy is random, whereas place-name doublets are motivated in a variety of ways, some of them closer to the linguistic phenomenon of *polysemy*. The four examples cited above each illustrates a different process of development. Recent work within linguistics has focused on the interface between homonymy and polysemy, leading to new insights that may also be relevant to onomastics. The broad terms *homonymy* and *polysemy* are inadequate to express the range of relationships represented by place-name doublets.

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Introduction

Some of the terminology within the metalanguage of onomastics is specific to our discipline, including many though not all of the entries on the extremely useful list prepared by the ICOS Terminology Group.[1] Other terminology is shared with, and sometimes borrowed from, other disciplines, notably linguistics. But just as terms from one language do not always map directly onto terms in another language, even where they originate as loan words, the same applies to cross-disciplinary borrowings. This paper focuses on the term *homonymy*, and argues firstly that onomastic uses do not correspond directly to linguistic uses, and secondly that the use of a single term within onomastics masks several different processes. Within linguistics, homonymy is often contrasted with polysemy, and this paper suggests that the notion of polysemy is particularly useful when names are considered from a diachronic perspective, although again it may operate differently in the lexicon and the onomasticon.

Homonymy in anthroponomastics

Homonymy is a key concept in name theory, featuring in at least two of the contributions to the recent volume of *Onoma* devoted to that topic.[2] In both instances, the context is that of anthroponomastics. The thesis, fundamental to onomastic theory, that a name picks out a unique referent as opposed to a member of a class is complicated by the fact that identical names pick out different referents. One way of resolving this is by invoking the notion of homonymy. Hence Richard Coates observes:

> In addition to *reference*, the other duties of a name are *vocation* ('calling'), i.e. the facility which maximizes the chances of successfully catching the attention of an individual in some context; and of course *nomination*, i.e. the often formalized agreement that a particular referring expression and homonymous vocative expression shall be a label for a certain individual, irrespective of that label's homonymy with the name of some other individual. (Coates 2006[2011]: 28–29)

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[1] Available at http://www.icosweb.net/index.php/terminology.html.
[2] *Onoma* 41, for the subscription year 2006, appeared in 2011.

In the same volume, Willy van Langendonck argues that homonymy is only a valid solution if names are taken to have lexical meaning – a highly controversial issue which Coates too has disputed vigorously and repeatedly (e.g. 2005, 2006, 2009):

> At first sight, a problem is posed by the fact that a number of personal names can denote numerous persons, e.g., *John* can denote John1, John2, and so on. However, to avoid the conclusion that the noun *John* does not indicate a one-element class since there are several elements called *John*, Hansack (2004, 57) invokes the notion of homonymy. John1, John2, and so on, are homonymous names. Since names have lexical meaning in the author's view, this is a legitimate solution. If they do not, as in my own framework, we can invoke the notion of *proprial lemma* (though not only for this). (van Langendonck 2006[2011]: 55)

The names in question here are of course bestowed names, so the perspective is a synchronic one, looking at how names are used at a given point in time. From a diachronic perspective, other considerations may come into play. This paper is primarily concerned with place-names, which are more likely to have evolved from descriptions, and where the majority of research takes a diachronic approach.

Homonymy in toponomastics

Whereas the term *homonymy* is used within anthroponomastics to refer to the same name applied to different individuals, the same term within toponomastics is used to refer to names with the same modern form but different origins. As with personal names, there are many instances of duplicated place-names; in fact there are probably very few unique names. Any UK place-name dictionary will have a number of entries for common names like Berwick and Newton;[3] there are several Glasgows in different parts of the world;[4] and when I was trying to plan my route to a one-day conference in central Scotland, I googled "Glasgow to Perth", and found myself being offered a choice of cheap flights to Australia!

As noted above, a difference between names and nouns is that whereas nouns identify classes of entities, names indentify individuals, so recurrent instances of the same place-name too are generally regarded as homonyms. The established view is lucidly summed up by Berit Sandnes in a footnote to an article on language contact in Orkney:

> Even if there is more than one *Cambridge* or *Paris* in the world, the place-name does not denote a class with common characteristics in the way appellatives do. There is a coincidence of linguistic sign, not of content, so such names could rather be seen as homonyms. (Sandnes 2007:179)

I agree entirely with the point being made here, but I think it is unfortunate that the only term available in English to describe the phenomenon is *homonymy*.

Homonymy and polysemy

The question of homonymy is important to the way we interpret recurrent place-names like Berwick, Newton, Perth and Paris. Traditionally in linguistics, homonymy has been contrasted with polysemy, the distinction being that whereas homonymy is random, polysemy is motivated.[5] Homonymy is where two instances of the same linguistic form are unrelated, usually because they have developed from different roots but fallen together in the

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[3] The most authoritative though selective dictionary of UK place-names is Mills (2003). Fuller coverage of English place-names is offered by Ekwall (1960) and Watts (2004), but the former is now considerably outdated and the latter is unreliable. Etymologies cited within this paper are mostly from these sources unless otherwise stated.

[4] Everett-Heath (2005: 187) lists occurrences in Jamaica, UK (Scotland) and USA; there may be others.

[5] See for instance Cruse (2011: 114–118) or Saeed (2009: 63–65).

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modern language in a single spelling or pronunciation or both. An example is Present-Day English (PDE) *burn*, where the sense 'stream' derives from Old English (OE) *burna* 'stream', while the sense 'injury caused by burning' derives from OE *byrnan* 'to burn'. It is sheer coincidence that they now have the same form, so that some linguistic expertise is required to differentiate between them in formations such as Burnham, a common UK place-name usually meaning 'homestead or village on a stream', and Burntisland in the county of Fife, Scotland, meaning 'burnt island'.[6]

Homonymy is often sub-divided into homography, where a word has the same spelling but a different sound, and homophony, where it has the same sound but a different spelling. Hence PDE *lead* 'strap fixed to a dog collar' is a homograph of PDE *lead* 'grey metal', while PDE *meat* 'food' is a homophone of PDE *meet* 'to come together'. An example from Scots, to which we shall return, is the place-name element *knowe* 'small hill', which is a homophone of the adverb *now* 'at the present time' and a near homograph of the verb *know* 'to be acquainted with'.

Polysemy is where a single root has developed different meanings, often through metaphor or other well-documented processes of semantic change. An example is the word *field*, where the concrete sense 'piece of ground' develops into abstract senses such as 'area of research'.[7] Here there is generally no doubt which sense is relevant in place-names; but with a term such as OE *cild*, the first element of Chilton and other recurrent formations in England, it can be difficult to choose between related senses such as 'child', 'young person', 'young nobleman' and 'young animal' (Hough 2004).

Although the differences between homonymy and polysemy appear to be clear-cut, there may not always be sufficient historical evidence to determine whether or not two modern forms are related. Moreover, it is debatable how far back it is appropriate to go. In some instances, two forms that have entered a language from different sources may have a common root. An example is the word *bank* discussed by Philip Durkin:

> From a diachronic perspective English has two homonyms with the form *bank*: the one is a borrowing from Old Norse, and has 'land at the side of a river' among its meanings; the other is a borrowing from French, and has 'place where money is deposited' among its meanings. The Norse and French words may perhaps ultimately be connected etymologically, but this is irrelevant to the history of the two words within English. (Durkin 2009: 75)

The situation is further complicated by the phenomenon known as *cognitive polysemy*, where semantic links are perceived between forms that are historically unrelated. An example is the word *ear* discussed by R. H. Robins:

> The relation between *ear*, body part, and *ear* of corn, barley, etc. is at least as close intuitively as that between *eye* and *eye of needle*, which is not, in fact, a connection drawn in all languages ...; in each case the relations between the two meanings could be brought under the very general heading of metaphor, but etymologically both *eye* words are from a single source (OE *ēage*),

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[6] Taylor (2006: 191–192) notes a local tradition that "the name arose because fishers' huts had been burnt on an islet east of the present harbour of Burntisland, and since incorporated into Burntisland docks", commenting: "As there is no doubt that the second element is the Sc[ots] *island* 'island' ..., and as no other alternative readily offers itself, this local tradition from the late eighteenth century should not be dismissed lightly. The burning of the huts might even have been a deliberate policy of land-clearance preparatory to the construction of the port in the early sixteenth century".

[7] I have pointed out elsewhere that some terms are used differently in the present-day lexicon and toponymicon. An example is *avenue*, which is "used literally in street-names, although the metaphorical meaning has largely taken over in other contexts" (Hough 2010: 15).

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whereas the *ear* words come from separate and unrelated earlier words in the history of English (OE *ēare*, ear (body part) and *ēar*, ear of corn). (Robins 1987: 59)

The perception of homonymy and polysemy may thus very from person to person, and depends to some extent on psychological salience as well as on etymological derivation.

Place-name doublets

Returning to place-names, it seems to me that there are four main processes leading to the development of duplicate place-names, or 'doublets'. One is where a single place-name form has developed from different etymologies. An example is Oxton. Several occurrences of Oxton in England derive from OE *oxa* 'ox' + OE *tūn* 'farmstead or estate', and mean 'farmstead where oxen are kept'. Oxton in Southern Scotland, on the other hand, means 'Ulfkell's farmstead', with a Scandinavian personal name *Ulfkell* as the first element (Nicolaisen 2001: 23, 151). Another example is Eaton, a common English place-name meaning either 'farmstead or estate on a river', from OE *ēa* 'river' + OE *tūn* 'farmstead or estate', or 'farmstead on dry ground in marsh', from OE *ēg* 'dry ground in marsh' and *tūn* farmstead or estate'. Another is Buxton, variously from OE **būg-stān* 'rocking stones' or OE *bucc* + *tūn* 'farmstead where bucks are kept'. This is the only type that I personally would regard as homonymy, since the coincidence of form is indeed just that: coincidence.[8]

More common is for a single place-name form to be coined independently on a number of occasions, from the same etymology. This applies to recurrent names such as Berwick 'barley farm' (OE *berewīc*) and Newton 'new farmstead' (OE *nīwe* + OE *tūn*), as well as to the later formation Ladywell 'spring dedicated to the Blessed Virgin'.[9] Here the semantic content of the names, when first coined, is identical. I would argue that this is not homonymy. Homonymy is unmotivated and accidental. There is no linguistic or semantic relationship between homonyms. There *is*, however, a relationship between the many Berwicks, Ladywells and Newtons – a relationship that we as place-name scholars acknowledge every time we investigate a corpus of names from a single element or combination of elements and use them to throw light on each other. This type seems to me to be closest to the situation pertaining with ordinary nouns, identifying classes of entities.[10]

A similar point is made by Bill Nicolaisen, discussing the name stock brought to Scotland by Scandinavian incomers from the ninth century onwards:

> Once a certain association has been made with regard to a certain place requiring a name, then only one specific name and none other could be given. If, for example, the major association for a particular island was that it was linked with the mainland or another island at low tide but separated from it at high tide, then it had, of necessity and not from choice, to be called **Ørfiris-ey*, "tidal island", because this was the name given to such islands in the homeland. (Nicolaisen 1982: 98)

Clearly then, all occurrences of the name are semantically related at the time of being created.

Slightly trickier are place-names from identical personal names referring to different people, as with the John1 and John2 cited above. Some personal names become fashionable at different periods, while others remain popular for centuries, and may form the basis of place-names commemorating eponymous but unconnected land-holders or local people. The recent survey of place-names for the Scottish county of Fife brought to light no less than

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[8] Even this may be open to question if analogy is a factor, as discussed below.
[9] Names from *lady* are discussed in Hough (2009a).
[10] The classifying function of place-names is explored further in Hough (2012).

seven occurrences of the formation An(n)field, probably dating from the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries (Taylor 2006: 290). Most if not all refer to different women called Ann, so unlike the Berwicks and Ladywells, they do not have precisely the same semantic content. Nonetheless, they are related in a way that the Buxtons, Eatons and Oxtons are not.

The same applies to the various Maryboroughs. Maryburgh in Ross and Cromarty, Scotland, appears to have been named from a local woman, Mary Elizabeth MacKenzie, in the early nineteenth century. The earlier name of Fort William in Scotland was also *Maryburgh*, after Queen Mary II, while the earlier name of Portlaoise in Ireland was another *Maryborough*, after Queen Mary I. These are clearly a related group of names, even though one commemorates Mary I, another Mary II, another Mary Elizabeth MacKenzie, and so on. I would therefore suggest that they are not homonyms, and that we should cease to regard them as such. It might be more appropriate to treat them as cognates, although even that may not quite fit the bill. Where I think we run into difficulty is in trying to map onomastic categories onto linguistic ones. As Richard Coates points out in his discussion of senselessness and properhood, "there are linguistic processes which apply just to names" (2005: 128). It might therefore make sense to develop a separate typology for the onomasticon.

There have of course been many sustained attempts to address the typology of names, including two book-length studies published in 2007 by John Anderson and Willy Van Langendonck. However, these tend to be synchronic rather than diachronic, focusing on the behaviour of names in present-day language rather than on their historical development. They also pay most attention to personal names, which are regarded as more prototypical than place-names. Anderson, for instance, remarks:

> The classification of names is hierarchical; and the hierarchy is based on markedness, where the latter is interpreted in terms of relative simplicity and its association with notional prototypicality. I have taken as least marked the prototypical, underived, names for individual persons ... (Anderson 2007: 202–303)

Van Langendonck presents an extended discussion of "prototypical proper names, of which personal names are the most prototypical subclass" (2007:186). Whereas this may be true from a synchronic perspective, it does not follow that it applies diachronically. Specifically in the context of UK name studies, it is place-names more than personal names that have evolved from the vernacular languages of the British Isles, so they may be the more prototypical in this respect.

Place-name transfers

The fourth way in which place-name doublets are formed is through name transfers.[11] One of the examples quoted above from Sandnes is Cambridge, found in various parts of the world as the name of towns which, as Everett-Heath (2005: 89) explains, "are generally named after the English university city or various Dukes of Cambridge". Similarly with Paris, the name of the French capital has served as the model for others in the USA and elsewhere. This is the case, for instance, as regards an occurrence in Kentucky:

> founded in 1789 as Hopewell, it was briefly called Bourbontown before being renamed again in 1790 as Paris in gratitude for French help during the American War of Independence (1775–83). (Everett-Heath 2005: 405)

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[11] Another way of referring to name transfers such as Cambridge and Perth is as *loan names*, and I fully support Alexandra Petrulevich's (2011) suggestion of an alternative term *place-name replication*.

These are not strict homonyms either, or at least not in the linguistic sense. Homonyms are coined independently of each other from different roots. This is closer to polysemy: the development of different meanings from a single root.

Such names might also be compared to bestowed names, where a name is selected from an existing corpus, as in anthroponomastics. Anderson refers to the process as "baptism":

> Place names are 'baptized' with the (active) names of other places, plus or minus a 'new' (Perth, Australia; New York), and possibly 'translated', or they are based on descriptions. (Anderson 2007: 305–306)

This does not seem to me to cover the full range of possibilities, and has the disadvantage that the term *baptized* invites close comparison with the process of naming children. It is certainly possible (even common) for a child to be named after a relative, just as a place may be named after another place, but the crucial difference is that a personal name may be bestowed irrespective of any connection with another bearer of the name, whereas a place-name may not. The deliberate re-use of a place-name entails a connection with the existing referent, which I suggest is more similar to, although not identical with, the development of polysemous uses of a lexical term.

Analogy and cognitive polysemy

Finally, where two place-names influence each other without originally being connected, as with the type of analogical reformation to which Coates (1987) has drawn attention, we may have a situation similar to that of cognitive polysemy as opposed to historical polysemy. Indeed, it may be arguable that the process of analogy has resulted in the development of place-names doublets such as Buxton, Eaton and Oxton from different roots, thus further reducing the corpus of names that I would regard as genuine homonyms. Homonymy is accidental, polysemy motivated. Analogy is a type of motivation, so where place-names reach the same modern form by analogy with others, the development is motivated.

Still on the topic of cognitive polysemy, a place-name that I have discussed elsewhere (Hough 2009b: 40–41) is the lost *Carlinknowes* in the parish of Burntisland, Fife, recorded as *Carlingneb* 1775, *Carlingneb* 1828 and *Carlinknowes* 1899 (Taylor 2006: 192). The original generic, Scots *neb* 'nose', is replaced during the nineteenth century by *knowe(s)* 'small hill(s)', a near homophone of the term *nose* itself. Although *knowe(s)* 'small hill(s)' is unrelated to the facial term, the phonetic similarity appears to have triggered an association which has influenced the development of the place-name. Because the historical spellings are on record, we can see this happening. It is of course entirely uncertain how many place-names may have been similarly affected prior to their appearance on extant record.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I suggest that the use of the term *homonymy* within toponomastics needs rethinking, and that this can usefully be done alongside recent work within linguistics on the interface between homonymy and polysemy. Relationships between place-names are not identical to relationships between words, and the development of a terminology capable of reflecting the subtleties of inter-onomastic connections might lead to a clearer understanding of the processes involved in the formation and development of the toponymic corpus.

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