Linguistics

WORDS ON THE HUTSUL UPLANDS

Geographical names reflect a complex intermingling of language, culture, history, and economics. The disappearance of names for small physiographical features, known only to small local communities, is driven in part by changes in economic activity – a process that may be observed in the micro-toponymy of the Hutsul region in Ukraine

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The Hutsul region (*Hutsulshchyna* in Ukrainian, *Huculszczyzna* in Polish) is a colorful ethnographic region occupying the eastern portion of the Ukrainian Carpathians. Traditionally inhabited by the Hutsuls, a highlander ethnic group, the region was within the boundaries of the Republic of Poland between the world wars, and highest range in the region, Chornohora, enjoyed great popularity among Polish tourists in the interwar period.

At the northeastern extreme of Chornohora, which now lies in Ukraine, is the village of Bystrets (Бистрець). It has a certain tenuous claim to fame as the summer residence of the Polish writer Stanisław Vincenz, the "Homer of the Hutsul region" who authored *Na wysokiej połoninie*, a four-volume work devoted to Hutsul culture (English abbreviated edition: *On the High Uplands: Sagas, Songs, Tales and Legends of the Carpathians*). But from the perspective of a linguistic fieldworker (such as the present author), it is perhaps more intriguing that local residents of Bystrets and its environs have retained a familiarity with local micro-toponyms (place-names), especially the names of higher-situated meadows from which hay was once gathered. As the practice of alpine animal husbandry and hay-gathering from the higher-situated meadows has fallen by the wayside, and as demographic shifts continue to affect the local society (including the outflux of the young generation to the towns and into nonagricultural professions), the micro-toponyms still remembered today can be expected to continue to disappear. As such, such names need to be documented and preserved.

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Photo 1:
The southern slopes of the Kosheryshe ridge, illustrating the traditional dispersed spacing of Hutsul households

Photo 2:
The remains of the Biały Słoń ("White Elephant") astronomical observatory on the summit widely known as Pip Ivan

The discrete charm of micro-toponymy

The field research the present author carried out in June and December 2015 combined purely linguistic work, eliciting and recording forms of place-names, with the kind of work typically done by topographers, registering the precise geographical reference of such names. Linguists have always found the linguistic properties of toponyms much more important than their precise delineation, generally only referring to the extent and properties of the named site itself when they are somehow pertinent in explaining the etymology. Topographers, on the other hand, who did the fieldwork that was once used as the basis for map-writing, must have treated name-collecting as a kind of side task, one frequently hampered by a language barrier. Both topographers (in reality almost always military topographers) and often linguists showed particular interest in the names of larger sites, with micro-toponymy generally not being registered. Higher-situated meadows used for hay-gathering generally had little military (and therefore cartographic) importance, whereas research on the linguistic properties and etymology of the toponymy of a given region generally focus more on gathering material from a region as a whole, than on investigating the densest possible network of low-level nomenclature.

How "micro-toponymy" should be understood has been variously defined: it was formerly considered to involve the names of physiographic features of small size, but is currently thought of as the study of physiographical names used by a small-sized community. Note that irrespective of which definition is chosen, we will still be dealing with similar sets of toponyms, as the names of small sites are generally known to small communities. However, there are of course certain very small physiographical features whose names are known to very large circles of people, such as sites of touristic interest or of symbolic importance. The latter definition was adopted for the purposes of this research, given that it more prominently highlights the sociological aspect of micro-toponyms: when such

names were being registered, the differences in their geographical scope of reference, as indicated by informants living in different parts of the village environs, were investigated as well.

Remnants of the Hutsul dialect

For example, let's take the name ascribed to the mountain ridge that was the main focus of my research (similar in size to the Połonina Caryńska massif in contemporary Poland). On the pre-WWII map produced by the Polish Military Geographical Institute, its highest point is referred to as *Kosaryszcze* (pronunciation *Kosaryshche*). This is a modified form (purged of Hutsul dialectical features) derived from the form that was used by the local population in the 1930s, *Kosheryshe* (with a soft pronunciation of *sh*). The ending *-shche* appears today as well, influenced by the Ukrainian literary language (its impact on Hutsul names becomes particularly evident when the spellings used in the Polish Military Geographical Institute map are compared against the old, local pronunciations). This toponym is classified as a cultural one, being linked to the pastoral lifestyle, cf. the Ukrainian term *kosharyshche*, referring to the location of sheep-pens (*koshary*). Interestingly, informants identified the place-name *Kosherysh(ch)e* as referring to a location of varying extent, or even to completely different locations, depending on which side of the ridge they lived on. The residents of the hamlet of Cherlene consider the name to refer to the extensive pass separating their valley from the village of Dzembronya (Дземброня), whereas residents of the main portion of the village of Bystrets consider it to cover nearly the entire ridge under study.

Because the traditional dispersed spacing of individual households, one of the most characteristic spatial features of old Hutsul villages, has been preserved in the study area, particularly in the hamlet of Cherlene and on the southern slopes of the ridge under study, the fieldwork necessarily entailed quite a bit of pleasant hiking. Trying to pin down the precise geographical reference of place-names also required prior topographical reconnaissance work and certain land-

scape-reading skills, although interviews carried out directly in the field were the main source of information. During such conversations, I tried to elicit the precise scope of reference of particular names with the help of photographs and satellite maps – having informants point to them, because trying to describe the layout of a landscape in words alone can be like trying to dictate a map over the phone. I should here express my vast gratitude to the local Hutsuls for being so very willing to share their knowledge with me.

The collected material allows certain conclusions to be drawn about the linguistic characteristics of the micro-toponymy of the studied area. Above all, I found the suffix -*ivka* (corresponding to the Polish -*ówka*) to be highly productive. Names formed with the suffix are used to designate both larger fragments of slope running from stream to ridgetop (e.g. *Shtefushivka*) as well as smaller fragments of hay-meadows. These micro-toponyms are frequently derived from personal names (generally the first owner of the land). The place-names so gathered, elicited from informants from the middle generation, still evidence certain Hutsul dialectical traits, such as the name of a part of the village, *Pid Zakinok*, where the first *k* is the result of the Hutsul shift of soft *t* into *k* (*Zatinok* basically meaning "shady place").

Topographers always to blame?

Another of the objectives of my research was to verify the nomenclature found on topographic maps. The name of one of the summits, *Stepański*, as shown on both the Spezialkarte (Austro-Hungarian) map and the Polish Military Geographical Institute map, turned out to be unfamiliar in this meaning to any of my several dozen local informants. While this is indeed the name of a hamlet situated just below the peak, the summit itself is nameless. Such situations are traditionally explained in terms of a "mistake by an Austrian topographer," who wanted to name a site important from the military standpoint and so transferred the name of a neighboring site to it. In my interviews, however, it sometimes happened that informants themselves transferred the name of a familiar nearby site to a generally nameless prominence, a fact that could only be uncovered and verified in later interviews. For instance, I was told that the name of a certain summit above the hamlet of Cherlene was *Tolsta*. However, this turned out to be the name of a now-overgrown meadow situated on the slope, once used for grazing. And so, not all such "transfers" are necessarily the intentional work of an Austrian topographer.

The "singing" summit?

In my interviews I also asked about the name of a certain summit situated on the main Chornohora ridge. In the 1930s a sizeable Polish astronomical observatory building was constructed on the peak, called *Biały Słoń* ("White Elephant"). Abandoned after WWII, the building has since fallen to ruin, but is now being renovated by the University of Warsaw in Poland in tandem with the Subcarpathian National University in Ivano-Frankivsk, Ukraine. The name of this particular mountain is an interesting example of how toponyms may wander between languages, and also of the friction that may occur within a language between national- and local-level naming customs. On the Polish Military Geographical Institute map this peak is labeled *Pop Iwan*, while on modern Ukrainian maps it generally figures as *Pip Ivan* (sometimes with a dash instead of a space). The Hutsul form, in turn, appears to have been *Popivan* (spelling reconstructed from pronunciation). The origin of the name is not fully clear. The locals relate that it derives from the fact that the wind at the summit *popivaye* ("sings"), but it is not immediately clear how much this simply might reflect an old folk etymology, which was even picked up in the 1930s by certain Polish circles, calling the peak the *Szczyt Rozśpiewany* ("the Singing Summit"). The key to understanding this toponym, it seems, lies in the Ukrainian vowel shift known as "ikavism" (which turns -*o*- into -*i*- in closed syllables). The first vowel in the local Hutsul form, *Popivan*, indicates that the word started with an open syllable, and so the syllabic division was indeed therefore originally *Po-pivan*. Nineteenth-century Polish incomers to the region reinterpreted the name through the prism of the familiar word *pop*, meaning orthodox priest, and the first name Ivan. The Polish spelling *Pop Iwan* then became prevalent (already evident on Austrian maps from the end of the 18th century), gaining popularity through various maps and tourist guides. Moreover, it was likely under the influence of the Polish variant (or rather, reinterpretation) of the name that it spread in standard Ukrainian as *Pip Ivan* (introducing a secondary ikavism!). The Hutsul locals are nowadays frequently confronted with the *Pip Ivan* form appearing in Ukrainian texts and on Ukrainian maps, in lieu of their own former *Popivan*, and given the presumable perception of written materials as having greater prestige, this form is now even locally supplanting the Hutsul variant.

As these examples have served to show, documenting Hutsul microtoponyms is a true journey into the past, involving the discovery of the hidden names of the original settlers. As such, it shares some of the charm of the work done by nineteenth-century topographers. It also involves a quest for remnants of the Hutsul dialect, and a fascinating visit to the bygone world of high-alpine shepherds in the Carpathians.

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Further reading:

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