

Semantics of Oronyms “Davaa” In The Mongolian Language

Badamkhorol.S.¹, Khurelnyam.S.²

¹University of the Humanities, Mongolia

²FL22F001@student.humanities.mn, khurelnyam@humanities.mn

Abstract

Toponyms have played an essential role in Mongolian nomadic way of life which totally depends on its nature and environment. Toponyms are rich in cultural and historic connotation giving some information about geographical characteristics, culture, beliefs, and way of thinking of the nation. With expanding globalization, significance and impact of toponymy, specifically oronymy, in terms of interdisciplinary research field has been emphasized by experts all over the world.

This small-scale study considers semantic aspects of oronyms with the word ‘davaa’ in the Mongolian language, and made an attempt to classify them based on their meaning. Once Mongolia is a mountainous country, there are numerous words used to name mountains and hills, but the word ‘davaa’, commonly used for Mongolian oronyms, was selected for the study as it plays a substantial role in the Mongolian Geographical Name Database. This paper aims to explore relationship between Mongols and mountains they worship, and picture their mental representation about the geographical reliefs through the word ‘davaa’. We hope once it is not a widely explored topic, this article may serve as a blueprint for further studies related to this topic.

Keywords: toponym, place names, geographical names, interdisciplinary

1. INTRODUCTION

Mongolia, a Central Asian country with harsh climate, is a mountainous country. 80% of the total area is 1000 meters above the sea level, with an average elevation of 1580 meters. Mountains play an important role in the nomadic way of Mongolian life, and for hundreds of years, Mongolians have worshiped, respected and named mountains. Although names as well as relationship between names and referents have been a research subject for many centuries, the origins of names started to have been investigated recently. Etymology, the study of the origin and evolution of words (names), has developed into more conscientiously scientific study and became a subfield within linguistics in the twentieth century.

Toponymy, the taxonomic study of place-names, based on etymological, historical, and geographical information, is a branch of onomastics. Toponymy is a general term for a proper name of any geographical feature, and full scope of the term also includes proper names of all cosmographical features. Among the names of any geographical place, the oldest name is the name of a mountain or a water body, which is common in many languages. This might be related to the ancient people's view of humanizing natural objects. For Mongolians, the ancient people's concept viewing mountains as eternal and divine beings with hidden powers has been passed down to our time in the names related to mountains.

According to Britannica, toponymy divides place-names into two broad categories: habitation names and feature names. A habitation name denotes a locality that is peopled or inhabited, such as a homestead, village, or town, and usually dates from the locality's inception. Feature names refer to natural or physical features of the landscape and are subdivided into hydronyms (water features), oronyms (relief features), and places of natural vegetation growth (meadows, glades, groves). Geographical names have always been studied for different reasons, by different disciplines and from different perspectives, especially by linguistics. Once such names reflect the historical and cultural information of the country, researchers consider studying place names as diving into the past. Research in this area has been very productive and continues to be advanced by a number of researchers (Conedera et al. 2007; Kathrein 2009).

From a wide range of geographical names, this paper deals with only oronyms, the proper names of mountains and hills, specifically in Mongolian.

We assumed that names of mountains and hills in the Mongolian language may reflect the historical, cultural, environmental/ geographical characteristics of the place as well as physical features like its shape, colour, size, and so on.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

People have always been able to use language correctly to name places or objects, even though they are not properly equipped with a set of grammatical or semantic rules on hand. The way people give names

to geographical places including mountains, hills, rivers, lakes and steppes reflects their cultural background, way of thinking and living, value of life, worldview, psychological aspects, innermost thoughts and etc. Therefore, some experts claim that oronyms tell us more about how people perceive the world and react to it rather than they express their geographical, archeological, zoological, botanical, historical, and cultural information. From this, it can be concluded that toponymy is definitely an interdisciplinary field which is related to behaviorism, cognitive and neuro science, psychology, and anthropology.

Botolv Helleland (2012) argued that there is an intimate relationship between place and place name, and he discusses how place names may reflect or give rise to feelings of individual and collective identity attached to the places in question.

According to scientist Bat-Ireedui. J. (2014), toponyms are unique in terms of quantity and quality; stable in nature that has been preserved for thousands of years, but can change for various reasons; they keep evidential information about different things, including plants and animals. While symbols are important for human names, distinctive features are essential for toponyms. "We, the nomadic Mongolians, have been using the names of mountains and rivers from generation to generation, but we have not paid much attention to the history, meaning, origin, and change of their names. Studying all of this in detail is important for the study of the naming principle of the Mongolian language, the cultural traditions, the characteristics of its continuity, and the semantics of the language," said researcher O.Sukhbaatar (2001), briefly and clearly emphasizing the importance of toponymy.

In Mongolian, oronym is defined to represent the uneven and raised part of the earth's surface. Depending not only on its size, shape, and height, but also which region they are, numerous specific words such as 'uul, ovoo, davaa, khutul, khairkhan, nuruu, guvee, oni, khamar' are used. Although there are so many words used to name raised surface of the earth (mountains), they are all semantically different. The Mongolian nomadic way of life has required to name all different elements of nature and distinguish between them whereas it is not important for people with settled lifestyle to communicate wild nature. What seems to be the same in one nation may differ in many ways in another. In a nutshell, while it may not be necessary for some nations to distinguish between these different characteristics, it may be necessary for others to distinguish between them.

The word "undur (the tall)" is used as a general term for mountain and hill name, without distinguishing the subtle difference. In other words, in everyday speech, the term "undur" can refer to any type of mountain, hill, peak or mound due to the unique location of different regions. Another word, used for this reason, is "ovoo (a pile)" which plays a special role in Mongolian oronymy. This should somehow be related to the ancient Mongolian practice of worshipping nature by building "ovoo", which is usually built in forms of stone heaps, but sometimes of wood. The tradition initially developed and thrived during the shamanic period and was later enriched with Buddhist ideologies and rituals. This has significantly contributed to the preservation of natural environment and wildlife as sacred and pristine. In addition, "ovoo", a pile of stone or wood, was formerly built to mark the boundaries between administrative units within the country, as well as, for the purpose of spatial orientation. Some researchers (Ravdan, E., 2010) have mentioned that ovoos were used with the above purposes during Manchu and Bogd Khanate Mongol Empires, but starting from 1940, the word appeared on the map naming mountains. Assigning a name to mountains is an essential manifestation that there is a certain connection between person and mountain. This approves that oronyms have not only socio-historical meaning but also anthropocentric/human-centered nature.

It is a real case in Mongolia that we can sometimes recognize the mountain or hill by its name because some of their names are so illustrative, describing its physical appearance. Although oronyms in Mongolian have clear meaning indicating somehow the characteristics of mountains, the constant use can cause the fade of their colorful and illustrative meaning, and people become unaware of its descriptive nature. In other words, when the oronym is frequently used, the meaning expressing emotion or its characteristics becomes less important, and its function of distinguishing and emphasizing stands out. However, this is not a reason to consider the oronyms meaningless. When someone first hears the oronym, the above mentioned qualities are clear, but become less noticeable as it is used regularly.

With the nomadic life style for centuries, Mongolians' life has been dependent on nature and climate, and they believe that there is a spiritual connection between people and nature. They have worshiped, honored and respected it all through their lives, and even have unique rituals to sacrifice, appease and express thanks to the nature. While moving from place to place, they observe every detail and experience the characteristics of the surrounding area. As a result, the names of mountains and hills in Mongolia

have been usually given by the people who live around the area. Most of Mongolian families live around in the same place (called ‘nutag’ in Mongolian) from generation to generation and get to know the surrounding area well. So they manage to give an appropriate name to the mountain or hill based on their life experience and knowledge. On the other hand, it can be said that name-giving process can be absolutely subjective. Oronyms are given by human beings, who try to be rational and realistic, but our subjective way of thinking is more or less reflected in them. As a result, some of their names are difficult to be clearly identified.

Cartographic specialist Oyunchimeg.Ts (2006) claimed: “As Mongolians observed and studied their territory and named it according to its peculiar features when they changed their location, territorial names are very useful for the finding of minerals and determining historical events. For example, the mining minerals from Oyu (turquoise) tolgoi, Erdentiin (treasure) ovoo, Altat (gold), Mungut (silver), Zest (copper) etc show that nomads knew resources of the places long back”. The tradition of naming the hills and mountains has a long history from the period when people who belonged to Altai-Uralian language group lived in Mongolian region, therefore there are some Mongolian oronyms that include old Turkic words, and vice versa.

The specialists claim that oronyms are more stable compared to the other types of toponyms. The shape, size, and colour of mountains and hills may change over time due to climate change, erosion, soil pollution etc, but the name that expresses their feature usually remains. In addition, easy, commonly-used, and non-complex structure and grammar used in the region play a big role in the formation of oronyms.

From the different words naming “mountains” in Mongolian, we chose the word ‘davaa’ which is commonly used for Mongolian oronyms. As davaa is significant to the livelihood of nomads, it occupies a prominent place in the Mongolian Geographical Name Database.

Davaa is defined as a part of the mountain where there is a pass used to cross the mountain (Tsevel. Ya, 1966), According to the Comprehensive dictionary of the Mongolian language (2008, p. 608), “davaa is a high, difficult, and rugged mountain range that obstructs the road”. The name “davaa” may have a shared root common to many Altaic languages. For example, the verb daba, meaning ‘to cross a mountain’, which was directly derived from daban/ davan, is found in Uyghur (Sevortyan, 1980, p. 112). In addition, A.V.Vovin (1986, p. 32) notes that the ‘dabagan’ in the Mongolian script, ‘dava’ in the Khamnigan language, and ‘dama’ in the ancient Japanese, which are derived from the root ‘uul (mountain)’, are equivalent to each other. Anyway, davaa has been included in the oronyms of many languages and dialects. For instance, Khamar-Daban, a mountain range in southern Siberia, in Russia; Qarj-Daban in Iran, the remains from the Mongol Empire.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study is based on the conceptual analysis of oronyms in Mongolian. During the study, both qualitative and quantitative methods for collecting and processing information were applied, and we analyzed the relationship between people and their perception of the surrounding geographical features, particularly mountains. The study of oronyms includes field research that requires to record oral dialogues and unwritten information.

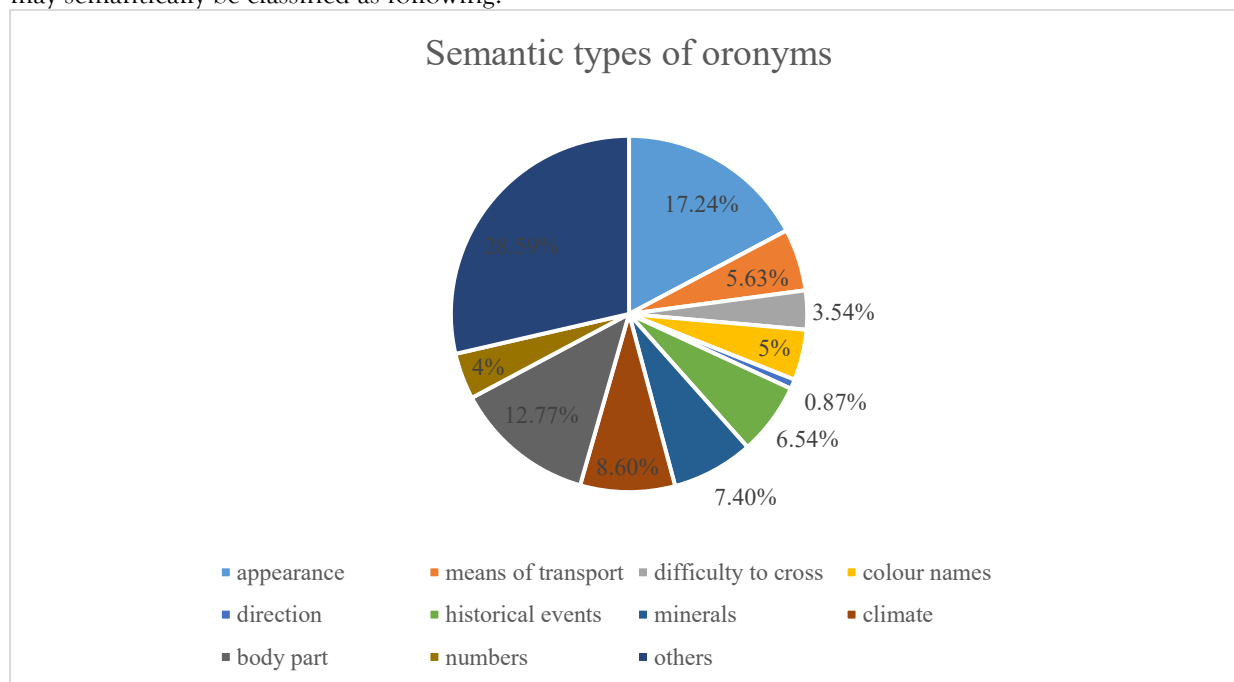
For the study, a descriptive method was used as well as other complementary methods: semantic analysis and synthesis, and comparative method. Only the oronyms with ‘davaa’ in the Mongolian Geographical Dictionary (2004) have been selected for the study.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4834 oronyms with the word ‘davaa’ were found in the Mongolian Geographical Dictionary (2004). Most Mongolian oronyms are compound words. The structures of the oronyms were analyzed based on the number of constituents. Three structurally-different types of oronyms were found, but there were not any five or more membered names among them.

Structure of oronyms	Number	Percentage
Two-membered	3602	74.5
Three-membered	1180	24.4
Four-membered	52	1.07
Total	4834	100

Except that, the authors did semantic analysis of the oronyms and made an attempt to classify them. As mentioned above, the oronyms, of course, are closely tied to their identity, but in different ways. They may semantically be classified as following.



Oronyms reflecting their appearance: The researchers mentioned that many mountains have more than one name, and many have experienced name change over time. On the contrary, some oronyms overlap for different mountains. Such oronyms show how people mentally visualize the davaas. The term “geovisualization”, also known geographic visualization, was coined. For example, Maikhan davaa – Maikhan means ‘tent’ in English, the local people say the mountain looks like a pitched tent. One interesting fact about Mongolian oronyms is that metonyms and metaphors are commonly used to describe the appearance, for example Tenger (sky) davaa. In this case, tenger (sky) probably means “high”. For Khalzan (bold) davaa, ‘khalzan’ means no trees or rocks.

Oronyms reflecting the means of transport to be used to cross the mountain: With the help of this kind of names, nomads were able to plan the means of transportation before their trip, so such names could serve as spreading news in non-digital era when nomads migrated looking for good pastures for their livestock. Such oronyms include Morin (horse) davaa, Ukhertiin (cow) davaa and so on.

Oronyms reflecting the difficulty to cross: Such names can give some general information about the mountain whether it is difficult or not to cross it. For example, Khetsuu (difficult) davaa, Tsagaan (white) davaa. When the Mongolian use the word ‘tsagaan (white)’ to name things, it usually expresses its colour, but it may also mean “easy, simple, not hard”, like ‘tsagaan zam (white road) = not bumpy or rugged road’. Therefore, Tsagaan davaa means ‘easy to cross’. In Shavartiin (mud) davaa, ‘shavart’ means the road to cross might be ‘muddy’.

Oronyms including colour names: It is also common for nomads to name davaas by the color of the surrounding area. There were 7 names as Nagoon (green) davaa, 78 as Ulaan (red) davaa, 43 as Khokh (blue) davaa, 59 as Tsagaan (white) davaa (in addition to the previously mentioned meaning of “easy, simple”, it cannot be denied that the color is indicated), 15 as Shar (beige) davaa, 12 as Ereen (variegated) davaa, and 4 as Khuren (violet) davaa.

Oronyms reflecting the direction: There are also many names for davaas that are distinguished by the direction based on the sun rise and sun set. For example, there were 12 Ar (north) davaa, 2 Ovur (south) davaa, 17 Baruun (west) davaa, and 14 Zuun (east) davaa, respectively.

Oronyms relating to historical events: Naming places immortalizing historical events and people is definitely related to the traditional Mongolian mindset of not forgetting their history and legends. The “Shijiriin davaa” was named after Shijir, the hero, who fought bravely against the Manchus. At the “Khamar davaa”, the army post was located during the Khalkh gol war against the Japanese, where the military council of Mongolian and Russian army gathered and developed the plan that led to the great victory in August 1939.

Oronyms reflecting minerals: Some oronyms include the names of minerals they are rich in, both the names of forecasting minerals and the names of minerals that have already been mined. For example, Tumurt (iron) davaa, Tsakhiurtiin (flint) davaa, Mungutiin (silver) davaa

Oronyms reflecting climate: Climate has a major influence on nomadic life. Therefore, some oronyms indicate the climate features of the region. For example, Khuitenii (cold) davaa, Tsast (snowed) davaa

Oronyms naming after human or animal body part: It is quite common for Mongolians to name davaa using body part names of human or animal, due to which part they locate in the mountains. For example, Khavirgiin (rib) davaa, Suga (armpit) davaa.

Oronyms including numbers: Numbers are used to name davaas, usually expressing different natural features. For instance, Gants modotiin (single-tree) davaa, Doloogiin (seven) davaa

The last category is named 'others', which minor semantic types are included in. For example, within this category, it was mentioned that Mongolians tend to use simile for some oronyms, resembling them with animals or other stuff, there are also other oronyms named after the flora and fauna species the mountain has belong to this category. Davaas are named by the plants that grow there. For example, Shinestiin (larch) davaa, Derstiin (feather grass) davaa

It is worth noting that place names in the world rarely contain verb roots in their structure, but such oronyms containing verb roots are quite often in Mongolian, like Achaa Gardag (goods uploaded) davaa, and Duruu khanginadagiin (padels ringing) davaa.

Mongolians have long tradition to respect davaas. One manifestation of this is the construction of a pile of stones and woods at the top of it, offering food, drink, and other items, placing a khadag (a traditional ceremonial scarf in Tibetan Buddhism), and asking for blessing. This custom is reflected in the names of davaas in a unique way, like using euphemism or replacing the name with the word "khairkhan". Thus, the naming of the davaa is of significant informational importance for nomadic way of life of the Mongolian.

5. Recommendation

Even though it was a small-scale survey, we hope it can serve as a blueprint for further research related to this topic.

- Oronyms are not only an important part of the vocabulary of the language, but also a special type of cultural (intangible) heritage. Therefore, their preservation, correct spelling, correct use of approved names in books, media, maps, etc., translation into foreign languages, and exchange of geographical names with other countries and nations should be at the center of the state's attention.
- A further survey may possibly be conducted to determine classification of the rest of the oronyms referring to 'others' in this study.
- The oronyms should be further studied thoroughly more based on the cognitive foundation with the new interdisciplinary approaches.

6. CONCLUSION

From the features of oronyms, the biggest motivation seems to be appearance, especially size of mountains. This is understandable and explainable that Mongolians believe mountains are sacred, magnificent and powerful, but as nomads, they are powerless and live depending on mountains, as they serve wind protection in harsh winter, pasture for their stock, and so on. From the results of the study, it can be concluded that visual perception plays a big role for oronyms.

It is noticed that once Mongols worship nature, their oronyms always have positive connotation. For reliable results in toponym studies, traditional research methods should be combined with new approaches due to the change in the modern scientific paradigm.

Mongolian oronyms mainly reflect the relationship between the people and their environment, naming their feelings of attachment, willingness to preserve the natural originality and resources, and commemorate historical events and people. Thus, oronyms are the mirror of history, culture, a way of thinking, lifestyle, and philosophy of the nation.

Finally, many oronyms in Mongolian belong to older version of the language or have their origin in other languages (Turkic, Tungues, Manchus, etc) previously spoken in the territory. They simply underwent the process of morphological and phonetic adaptation. Thus, the meanings of many oronyms are difficult to identify.

REFERENCES

1. Bat-Ireedui, J. (2014). The research issues of the geographic names in contemporary Mongolian literature. *Acta Mongolica*, 15 (411), 197–200. <https://journal.num.edu.mn/actamongolica/article/view/5742>
2. Barbara Bába. (2016). A study of two-part toponyms from a cognitive aspect. DOI: 10.2436/15.8040.01.102
3. Botolv Helleland, C. E., Wikstrøm, S. (2012). Names and Identities, *Oslo Studies in Language* 4(2), 95–116. (ISSN 1890-9639)
4. Conedera, M., Vassere, S., Neff, C., Meurer, M., Krebs, P. (2007). Using toponymy to reconstruct past land use: a case study of »Brusada« (Burn) in southern Switzerland. *Journal of Historical Geography*. 33. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2006.11.002>
5. Dorj, B., Batbold, O., & Ravdan, E. (2008). *Mongol Khel-Soyolyn Düytselgüy Neriyn Taylbar Toli* [Thesaurus of Mongolian Cultural Untranslatable Words]. Ulaanbaatar: Admon Printing. (In Mongolian)
6. Enkhbayar, R. (2004). *Mongoliyn Gazar Nutgiyn Neriyn Züylchilsen Toli* [Thematic Dictionary of Mongolian Toponyms]. Ulaanbaatar: National University Press. (In Mongolian)
7. John Algeo., Katie Algeo. (2000). Onomastics as an Interdisciplinary Study. *A Journal of Onomastics*, 48(3-4): 265-274
8. Kathrein, Y. (2009). Onomastic research within a project on historical mining sites. The research program HiMAT in Austrian Tyrol working paper 4. Session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) in Nairobi 5.–12.
9. Oyunchimeg Tsendsuren. (2006). Toponymy of Mongolian geographical names. UN Working paper, 22, 1-9
10. Ravdan, E. (2004). The research of Mongolian geographical names: Morphology and semantics, Ulaanbaatar
11. Ravdan, E. (2006). The thematic dictionary of Mongolian geographical names. Ulaanbaatar
12. Serjee, J. (2010). The research of proper nouns in contemporary Mongolian, Ulaanbaatar
13. Sevortyan. (1980). *Etymological Dictionary of Turkic Languages*. Turkey
14. Sukhbaatar, O. (2001). The legend of the geographical names in Mongolia. Ulaanbaatar
15. Tsevel, Ya., (1966). *Concise dictionary of the Mongolian language*. Ulaanbaatar
16. Vovin, A.V. (1986). *Illustrated Dictionary of Mongolian Geographical Names*
17. *Comprehensive dictionary of the Mongolian language*. (2008). Ulaanbaatar