

**DIACHRONIC TOPONOMASTICS AND LANGUAGE
RECONSTRUCTION IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA
ACCORDING TO AN EXPERIMENTAL CONVERGENT
METHODOLOGY:
ABUI AS A CASE-STUDY**

Francesco PERONO CACCIAFOCO, Ph.D. *,

Francesco CAVALLARO, Ph.D. **,

František KRATOCHVÍL, Ph.D. ***,

**Post-Doctoral Research Fellow,*

***Associate Professor,*

****Assistant Professor,*

Nanyang Technological University (NTU),

College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences (COHASS),

School of Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS),

Division of Linguistics and Multilingual Studies (LMS),

Singapore

E-mail: fcacciafoco@ntu.edu.sg – dottor.francesco.perono@gmail.com

cfcavallaro@ntu.edu.sg

fkratochvil@ntu.edu.sg

Abstract: *Diachronic toponomastics and language reconstruction in South-east Asia according to an experimental convergent methodology: Abui as a case-study.* The aim of this paper is to propose and to provide a new experimental methodology in the study of endangered and/or undocumented languages starting from toponymy and applying to this field innovative diachronic toponomastics criteria partly adopted from Indo-European linguistics. This new convergent methodology provides an all-embracing analysis of toponyms, hydronyms, and oronyms of a specific area not only through the lens of ‘pure’ etymology and historical phonetics, but also through a systematic and extensive examination of collected data by other scientific disciplines, such as historical geography, landscape archaeology, geo-archaeology, analytical archaeology, historical cartography, historical topography, paleo-anthropology, genetics, and historical semantics. This convergent and experimental application of diachronic toponomastics criteria to the toponymy of endangered and/or undocumented languages allows for the reconstruction not only of the ‘remote stratigraphy’ of place names, hydronyms, and oronyms, but also of the speakers’ interpretation and description of the environment, of their visual representation of the landscape and territory, and of their (spiritual and pragmatic) relationships with



the geographical space. This methodology allows us to highlight the ancient origins of the languages under investigation and, by crossing linguistic data with data from other disciplines, to go back in time maybe until the prehistory of a population and, moreover, of a culture and/or a civilization. This method also provides valuable information about people's movements and settlement dynamics over time. The first part of the paper outlines a theoretical description of the methodology; the second part provides two analytical (and systemic) examples of the application of this method from / on Abui (a language belonging to the Alor-Pantar family of Papuan languages spoken on the islands of the Alor archipelago near Timor, in Southern Indonesia), in order to set and to propose an initial pattern related to this experimental hermeneutic and epistemological approach.

Rezumat: *Toponomastică diacronică și reconstrucție lingvistică în sud-estul Asiei prin metoda experimentală convergentă: Studiu de caz, Abui.* Scopul lucrării de față este de a propune și de a oferi o nouă metodologie experimentală în contextul studierii limitate a limbilor pornind de la domeniul toponimic și aplicând pentru acest domeniu criterii inovative din punct de vedere al toponomasticii diacronice, criterii utilizate în domeniul Indo-european al studiului lingvistic. Această nouă metodologie convergentă oferă o analiză comprehensivă a toponimelor, hidronimelor și oronimelor dintr-un anumit spațiu, nu doar prin etimologia pură și fonetica istorică, dar și prin examinarea sistematică și extensivă a datelor colectate din diferite discipline cum sunt geografia istorică, arhitectura peisagistică, paleontologia, geo-arheologia, arheologia analitică, cartografia istorică, semantica istorică etc. Această metodă convergentă și experimentală a criteriilor toponomasticii diacronice permite reconstrucția stratigrafiei numelor de locuri, a hidronimelor și oronimelor precum și a interpretării și descrierii discursului asupra mediului, a reprezentării vizuale a peisajului și a teritoriului. De asemenea, permite descrierea relațiilor acestora cu spațiul geografic implicit. Metodologia permite evidențierea vechilor origini ale limbilor prin investigarea și intersecția datelor cu alte abordări specifice unor discipline diferite, centrate pe problemele culturii și civilizației. Mai mult decât atât, metoda oferă informații importante despre dinamica populațiilor și a așezărilor umane în decursul timpului. Prima parte a lucrării cuprinde o secțiune teoretică asupra metodologiei, în timp ce a doua parte oferă două analize concrete în cadrul cărora metoda mai sus menționată este aplicată. Studiile de caz sunt centrate asupra limbii Abui cu scopul de a propune un nou șablon legat de abordarea epistemologică și hermeneutic-experimentală.

Key words: *toponomastics, Abui, experimental convergent methodology.*

Cuvinte Cheie: *toponomastică, Abui, metoda convergent experimentală.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The descriptive approach to endangered languages is really useful and valuable in order to safeguard those languages and to clarify their grammar and, sometimes, their genealogy. However, this kind of discipline, because of its same nature, does not investigate in depth the historical developments of the languages in question. The reconstruction of proto-forms, aiming at going back to the remote (possibly prehistoric) origins of the same languages, is best done by historical linguists.

This study has its origins in the collaboration between descriptive linguists, historical linguists and sociolinguists. This paper will, therefore, try to propose an innovative methodology aimed at the diachronic study of endangered languages according to a 'socio-historical' perspective. Only through a convergent, interdisciplinary, experimental, multidisciplinary, and all-embracing approach, in fact, it is possible to shed

light on the diachronic developments of an endangered (documented or undocumented) language¹.

2. METHODOLOGY

The starting point in this study can be represented by toponymy. Place names, hydronyms (river names and names of bodies of water), and oronyms (mountain names) can, in fact, be really relevant in the diachronic reconstruction of a language (especially in the absence of historical documentation), since the toponyms are, generally, ‘stable’ in a linguistic system² and they allow the reconstruction of the most remote strata of the naming processes and of their lexical development.

This comparative methodology is based on the etymological study of place names (toponomastics) and general lexicon (onomastics) and on the analytical evaluation – through historical phonetics – of the reconstructed roots and proto-roots indispensable in order to trace back the origins of a language. Contextually, this approach requires the involvement of other scientific disciplines such as, for example, historical geography, historical topography, historical cartography, landscape archaeology, geo-archaeology, analytical archaeology, paleo-anthropology, genetics, and historical semantics.

Toponomastics often allows a precise evaluation of the ancestral stages of languages. It is possible to define this discipline *historical toponomastics* if we have adequate historical documentation or if we have well established hermeneutic instruments to investigate a well-known language family (as the Indo-European one, for example). It is possible, instead, to talk about *diachronic toponomastics* in the absence of historical records on a language and also if that language does not show a clear genealogical connection with a specific linguistic family. The adjective *historical*, in fact, implies the possibility to study historical documentation (texts on different written documents from epigraphs to books, for example) and to be able to avail ourselves of historical dictionaries and lexicons. The adjective *diachronic*, conversely, strictly implies a chronological – diachronic, indeed – study from one ‘point’ in time to another ‘point’ (for example from the current and attested form of a place name to the remote, original, and reconstructed form of the same place name). This makes it possible to go back in time without historical documents. *Diachronic* implies, moreover, a notion of ‘structural’ analysis of a name, to be produced through a comparative approach based mainly on historical phonetics. *Diachronic toponomastics*, therefore, is the science of studying toponymy in undocumented and/or endangered languages.

Through a diachronic study of words (general lexicon) and place names it is also possible to reconstruct certain historical events that occurred to minority populations even in the absence of written records. This can be accomplished by basing the analysis on the ‘story’ / history of a name or place name linked, for example, to a catastrophic event, such as the eruption of a volcano.

¹ Cf., e.g., Brogyanyi, B., (1979), *passim*; Perono Cacciafoco, F., (2014a), pp. 79-98 (with bibliography); Perono Cacciafoco, F., (2014b), pp. 105-127 (with bibliography).

² Cf., e.g., Wainwright, F. T., (1962), *passim*.

The diachronic study of languages, as well as the descriptive study of the same, can be decisive in the safeguarding of the languages' historical memories. The reconstruction of the proto-forms of the place names (toponyms), river names (hydronyms), and mountain names (oronyms) can allow the scholars to go back to the prehistoric origins of a culture and/or civilization. In historical linguistics and diachronic linguistics toponymy should be always the focal point of a 'historical' or 'diachronic' study of languages, both when a language family is well studied and documented ('historical study'), and when the analytical focus is on endangered or not documented languages ('diachronic study').

Place names, hydronyms, and oronyms are often very persistent and unchanged³ in time, even when a territory is characterized by population movements and language shift. They are able, therefore, to survive demographic changes, and even dramatic and violent settlement dynamics (immigration or invasion by people who speak different languages). If the place names are modified because of a change of population, often they preserve their origins in the 'onomastic morphology' (for example in their roots) and they are adapted to the linguistic system of new speakers, without being completely removed or replaced. The new speakers tend to consider the previous place names as ancient and prestigious forms (linguistically) of 'landscape description' and they have no interest in 'removing' or changing them (unless they do not want a sort of *damnatio memoriae* of the population they have defeated and/or subdued). The place names, moreover, are 'comfortable' in the orientation system for the new people (even if the new population does not understand their original meanings), being already known (and 'ready') reference points, not requiring modification or 're-setting'.

A place name can change, not necessarily because a population is replaced by another, but because of the natural evolution of languages and dialects. The speakers tend to lose, over time, the original meaning of a place name and, when they are no longer able to explain it, they try to link it to the local dialect or to more understandable names from the general lexicon in order to 'find' a possible – often wrong – etymology⁴. The place name, therefore, does not lose its basic morphology or its root (the whole morphology can change, instead, over time). It is just 'victim' of 'misunderstanding' and 'misinterpretation' – in semantics – by local speakers. This will be discussed in the next section.

3. TOPONYMIC PARETYMOLOGY

This linguistic 'misinterpretation' – in this case natural – is called *paretymology*⁵. A *paretymology* (or *paraetymology*, *pseudo-etymology*, *false etymology*) is the process according to which a word is reinterpreted on the basis of similarities of form or meaning (or sound) with other words, deviating from the original form or meaning. Speakers try to motivate an otherwise obscure 'sign' through their linguistic competence. It happens, generally, when the transparency of the origins or of the original meaning of the word has been lost and it is necessary to find a support, according to the phonetics or to the meaning, for that word, even forcing the form itself.

³ Cf., e.g., Wainwright, F. T., (1962), cit., *passim*.

⁴ Cf., e.g., Mailhammer, R., (2013), *passim*.

⁵ Cf., e.g., Mailhammer, R., (2013), cit., *passim*; Mailhammer, R., (2014), *passim*.

This kind of paretymology can also appear as a specious (apparently plausible, but false) belief or reconstruction of the origins of words, often originating in ‘common-sense’ assumptions. In this broadest, extended case, it can be defined as a *false* or *wrong etymology*. Such ‘toponymic’ etymologies have often a mark of ‘popularity’, being derived – or being believed to be derived – from popular origins or traditions. They are called, therefore, *popular etymologies* (calque from the German *Volksetymologie*).

These etymologies are marked by a pseudo-linguistic approach characteristic of the pre-scientific study of language, considered – by speakers – as a timeless and unchanging entity, bearer of symbols on the edge of the ‘oracular’. They do not consist in an alteration of the form of a word, but, simply, in a forced interpretation of its origins and of its original meaning, starting from the different beliefs and backgrounds of speakers.

The ‘toponymic’ paretymologies can be considered, therefore, also as *pseudo-etymologies* in the broadest sense, definable as *popular etymologies* widespread among people, elaborated thanks to the creative imagination of the popular spirit (*ésprit*), based, without a methodological approach, on analogies, on local traditions, or even derived from political and/or identity-making reasons.

The ‘misunderstanding’, by speakers, of the original meaning and structure of a place name can be technically configured also as a *folk etymology* (called sometimes, but non properly, *pseudo-etymology*), definable as a change in a word or phrase over time, resulting from the replacement of an unfamiliar form by a more familiar one. The technical term *folk etymology* is used about the change of form in the word itself, not about any actual explicit popular analysis. In the linguistic change caused by folk etymology the form of a word changes so that it better matches its popular rationalization. Typically, this happens either a) to unanalyzable foreign words or b) to compounds where the word underlying one part of the compound becomes obsolete. A process similar to folk etymology may result in a change in the meaning of a word based on an imagined etymology connecting it to an unrelated, but similar-sounding word. Often this comes about through the confusion of a foreign or obsolete word with a more common word, but it can also result from the exchange between two words that have become homophones. Many folk etymologies develop themselves in time and become universally accepted until to the point where they entirely replace the original form in a language.

In any case, as mentioned, the process inherent in the change in meaning of a place name generally follows the natural evolution of languages. Just in order to exemplify, it is possible to briefly analyze, among others, the case of the Italian place name *Borgomale* (*Borgo Male*). Borgomale (geographic coordinates 44°37'00"N 8°08'00"E) is a small village located in North-Western Italy, Piedmont (Piemonte), in the Cuneo’s Province. Its original name derives from Latin (Indo-European language) *Burgus Māli*⁶ and has been transmitted to Italian (neo-Latin Romance language) as *Borgomale* (*Borgo Male*), meaning, according to the widespread (paretymological) interpretation, ‘bad village’, ‘village of evil’. The original, Latin meaning of the toponym was ‘village of the apple tree / trees’ (Latin *burgus* – Italian *borgo* – means ‘village’, ‘hamlet’).

In Latin *mālum*, meaning ‘bad’ / ‘evil’, shows the short vowel *ă*, characterizing this word. The Italian corresponding forms are *male* (noun, ‘evil’), *malo* (adjective, ‘bad’). Latin *mālum*, conversely, with the long vowel *ā*, means ‘apple’ / ‘apple tree’, in Italian *mela* (‘apple’), *melo* (‘apple tree’). Taking a look at the emblem and/or coat of arms of the

⁶ Cf. DTL, (1999), p. 89 (s. v. *Borgomale*, by Rossebastiano, A.).

Borgomale municipality, it is possible to distinguish a row of apple trees on a hill, and apple orchards were present, in that area, during the Middle Ages and in Modern Age. The evidence is that, over the centuries and in the transition among Latin, Vulgar Latin, Vernacular (Vulgar) Italian, and Italian, the name has changed in meaning to indicate ‘bad village’ and/or ‘village of evil’. Why? Because of a typical semantic ‘misunderstanding’ (generating paretymology) that is proper to the natural evolution of languages and linked to the transition between a language and another. In Latin the vocalic ‘quantity’ is very important for the metric in poetry and in order to distinguish words and their meanings. Italian, instead, has lost the vocalic ‘quantity’ (also the Italian poetry is not ‘quantitative’) and this linguistic fact (‘evolution’) has been at the origins of some ‘misunderstandings’.

The original, Latin name of Borgomale was, therefore, *Burgus Māli* = ‘village of the apple tree’ (extensive ‘village of the apple trees’), and the Italian reconstructed correct (and, of course, not attested) form could be **Borgo Melo* (or **Borgomelo*, exactly ‘the village of the apple tree’). However, the Italian ‘real’, current, and attested form derives from the ‘quantitative misunderstanding’ – become widespread – of the Latin vowel /a/, *Burgus Māli* = ‘bad village’ / ‘village of evil’, and is *Borgomale* (*Borgo Male*).

In order to ‘explain’ this ‘bad’ name, the speakers, having lost the original link of the toponym with Latin *mālum* (‘apple’ / ‘apple tree’), invented a legend about a horrible plague or pestilence that would have violently decimated, sometime in the Middle Ages, the population of the village that, from that time, was called *Borgomale* (< Latin *Burgus Māli*), ‘bad village’ / ‘village of evil’. This is a very incisive example of *bona fide* paretymology in (historical) toponymy.

4. CHANGES IN PLACE NAMES AND ‘ARCHAEOLOGY OF LANGUAGE’

It can be useful, now, to highlight the possible reasons for changes in a place name. A toponym (or hydronym or oronym) changes:

- a) in consequence of a change of population, non-necessarily violent;
- b) when the local speakers lose the original meaning of that place name (or hydronym or oronym), due to the passage of time (generally over centuries or millennia).

However, this change is not necessarily absolute and/or complete, because, as mentioned,
i. generally the new population tends to maintain the toponymy of the previous population, in order not to change the orientation system;
ii. if the population is not replaced, and remains ‘stable’ (without changes and new settlements), the ‘misunderstanding’ by the ‘original’ speakers (causing paretymology) does not modify the basic morphology (especially the root) of the place name (e.g. *Male* in *Borgomale* / *Borgo Male*).

In order to analyze through a scientific lens this set of onomastic phenomena, it is possible to use an experimental historical-linguistic approach oriented to multidisciplinary and interdisciplinarity. By applying a comparative etymological methodology to toponymy, in fact, it is possible:

- a) to reconstruct the right etymology of a place name;
- b) to highlight:

- i. the original ‘naming process’;
- ii. the subsequent process of paronymy;
- iii. the links and relationships of the place names with other place names or words from the common onomastics or from the general lexicon of the studied language or of related languages.

Starting from the reconstruction of the original root of the place name through historical phonetics criteria and linguistic comparison and comparing again the stem with words from the general lexicon of the language or with toponyms, hydronyms, oronyms, and common words from related languages, it is possible to go back to the plausibly remote origins of a place name and to the first stages of development of a specific language.

This allows the elaboration of an ‘archaeology’ of language, establishing a ‘stratigraphy’ in the ‘making’ of place names and highlighting the possible origins of the ‘naming process’, starting from the most conservative forms in languages that are place names, hydronyms, and oronyms. The study and the evaluation of the change in the toponymy of a specific area allow to reconstruct, also in the absence of historical documentation, population movements and settlement dynamics and to interpret, through a sort of ‘remote sampling’⁷, the changes in the perception and description of landscape by the speakers of the analyzed language(s). Diachronic toponomastics, therefore:

- opens a historical (not only diachronic) perspective on the origins of populations also in the absence of historical documentation;
- reconstructs remote (possibly prehistoric) onomastic roots in the system of the analyzed language(s);
- discovers ‘genetic’ links of a specific language with other related languages;
- can enable us to reconstruct the proto-language from which the analyzed specific language derives together with other related languages belonging to the same linguistic family.

5. TOPONOMASTICS AND OTHER SCIENCES IN ETYMOLOGICAL RECONSTRUCTION

As mentioned above, it is impossible to study diachronic toponomastics only on the basis of etymology and historical phonetics. In order to elaborate an effective diachronic / chronological reconstruction – it is only right to repeat that – other disciplines have to be involved in the linguistic analysis, i.e. historical geography, historical cartography, historical topography, landscape archaeology⁸, geo-archaeology⁹, paleo-anthropology¹⁰, genetics, and historical semantics¹¹. In particular, data from landscape

⁷ The ‘sampling’ can be defined as “remote” because, as mentioned, place names are, often, original forms, very close, at least in their roots, to the origins of a specific language (or to its proto-language).

⁸ Cf., e.g., David, B., and Thomas, J., (2008), *passim*; Cambi, F., (2011), *passim*.

⁹ Cf., e.g., Cremaschi, M., (2008⁶), *passim*.

¹⁰ Cf., e.g., Facchini, F., (1993), *passim*.

¹¹ Cf., e.g., Beretta, C., (2003), pp. 5-225 and *passim*; Perono Cacciafoco, F., (2014a), cit., pp. 79-98 (with bibliography); Perono Cacciafoco, F., (2014b), cit., pp. 105-127 (with bibliography).

archaeology and geo-archaeology can be studied through an analytical approach (analytical archaeology)¹².

A careful evaluation of changes in the geo-morphology of territories and in human settlements of inhabited areas allows researchers to investigate the possible links of a place name with the actual landscape, confirming or disproving etymological hypotheses¹³. For this kind of scientific study it is essential that a physical examination of the hydro-geo-morphology of the territories and areas under investigation is carried out, in order to correlate, as mentioned, place names and landscape, and also to ascertain whether dramatic changes (for instance the eruption of a volcano, for example Krakatoa – in the Rakata Island, Indonesia – and Santorini – in the Santorini Island, Greece) have occurred¹⁴.

The reconstruction process, therefore, starts from a classic, elementary ‘principle’: the meaning of a place name located on the seashore is unlikely to be ‘village on the top of the mountain’. If this is the actual recovered meaning, then the scholars have to reconsider their reconstruction or, rather, they have to seek for linguistic, archaeological, geographic (and topographic), geological, and, sometimes, historical evidences to be able to confirm this kind of ‘anomalous’ etymological restitution. If the etymological reconstruction leads to ‘aberrant’ semantic results (even if ‘correct’, according to historical phonetics), in fact, it would be a good strategy to always consider these ‘aberrant’ forms as wrong, and their ‘wrong’ reconstruction depending from the possibly incorrect restitution of the place names’ roots or from a plausibly erroneous interpretation of their meaning.

‘Pure’ etymology and historical phonetics, as far as fundamental in toponymic studies, therefore, are not sufficient, by themselves, to get a correct and convincing reconstruction of a place name and its context.

However, the etymological and historical-phonetic analyses of different place names can allow the reconstruction of common roots and links between place names and the general lexicon in a specific language, offering the opportunity to classify different stages and strata in the history or, at least, in the diachronic development of that language.

6. CLASSIFYING THE PLACE NAMES

In order to get a complete and clear basic description of a place name, it is advisable to establish some ‘cataloguing’s coordinates’.

It is possible, in fact, to classify place names according to different criteria:

- a) the onomastic source (landscape features, proper names, ceremonial locations, significant trees, etc.);
- b) the primary and basic structure of the names (‘simple’ or composed);
- c) the ‘morphology’ of the names (if they show reduplication in their roots, for example, or specific prefixes and/or suffixes);
- d) the frequency in the toponymic system (if they are ‘isolated’ or if their roots are involved in the ‘making’ of other place names);

¹² Cf., e.g., Clarke, D. L., (1968), *passim*.

¹³ Cf., e.g., Gelling, M., and Cole, A., (2000), *passim*.

¹⁴ Cf., e.g., Layton, R., and Ucko, P., (2004), *passim*.

e) the semantics and the links with the hydro-geo-morphology of the territory.

Historical semantics interprets place names according to other, additional criteria, evaluating:

- a) whether the place name is 'transparent' (e.g. 'village on the river') and self-evident or unclear, allowing to verify the correspondence between the name and the geo-morphological structure of the territory;
- b) whether the place name is related to the primary goods for the people (water, food, animals, stone, fire), allowing researchers to determine a possible ancient origin of the toponym, presumably a stable onomastic form, and of the place, maybe prehistoric;
- c) whether the place name is not inherent in an 'immediately evident' physical feature of the territory. It can indicate, rather, a 'poetical interpretation' of landscape (e.g. 'village of the flowery meadow' / 'flowering meadows') or a spatial description of the settlement (e.g. 'upper village'). The 'poetical interpretation' of the territory and the spatial description of the inhabited center could 'describe' a toponym less ancient than those linked with the primary natural goods, because they imply a sort of 'intellectualization' of the landscape. The place names linked to the primary goods were, in fact, basic and essential in the 'ideal oral map' that the stone-age people had to 'develop', 'giving name' to places, in order to orient themselves in their areas, with specific indications for food and water. Those indications, for practical and survival's reasons, conditioned in a decisive way the original 'naming process' in prehistoric, remote times¹⁵;
- d) whether the place name is a compound (e.g. 'big village'). In this case, the toponym is generally 'transparent' in the meaning and it requires a historical / diachronic comparative study in order to be chronologically classified;
- e) whether the place name is ambiguous. In that case, it is necessary to try to reconstruct its root through a comparison with forms from the general onomastics (general lexicon) of its language and with place names and words from related languages;
- f) whether the place name (or its root) shows a 'semantic specialization' over time (for example in the 'specialization' of the same 'town' from 'generic town' to 'part of a town', 'hamlet').

7. A MULTIDISCIPLINARY, EXPERIMENTAL APPROACH

Theories originated from Indo-European linguistics (where the field of toponymy has been and is intensively studied) offer a solid and well-tested pattern that can be used in the general reconstruction of non-Indo-European undocumented and/or endangered languages. Following a convergent, interdisciplinary, experimental, and multidisciplinary methodology¹⁶, it is possible to cross, according to an all-embracing approach, data from

¹⁵ Cf., e.g., Facchini, F., (1993), cit., *passim*.

¹⁶ It is possible, for example, to refer to the so-called New Convergence Theory (NCT). Cf. Perono Cacciafoco, F., (2014a), cit., pp. 79-98 (with bibliography) and Perono Cacciafoco, F., (2014b), cit., pp. 105-127 (with the

different disciplines, highlighting a concept that is simple and crucial and that is the foundation of the epistemological reasoning of this paper: in order that the scientific analysis of place names (toponyms, hydronyms, and oronyms) can be effective and verified, it should not be conducted only on a strictly linguistic basis, in the etymological 'abstract' reconstruction, but, rather, it should also take into account the geo-morphological characteristics of the studied sites, the paleontology and paleo-anthropology of their territories, as well as data provided by genetics and archaeology. The historical linguist and the etymologist would have to focus their attention, therefore, not only on the etymology *stricto sensu* of a place name, but also on the verisimilitude of the linguistic reconstruction in relationship with the 'real' data from the territory and with the suggestions provided by other related sciences, in order to reconstitute the most accurate possible and consistent etymology of a place name.

The hermeneutic analysis starts always from an etymological approach, in which the morphology of the place name has to be evaluated both by historical phonetics and by historical semantics, and then the analysis moves to all the other above-mentioned disciplines. The aim and the foundation of this new approach, in fact, consists exactly in the systematic application of historical phonetics to an all-embracing study of ancient place names (paleo-place names = toponyms, hydronyms, oronyms), associating the etymological reconstruction with the study of historical semantics of analyzed forms and evaluating the historical geography (and geo-archaeology) of place names' sites. The analysis of the morphology of territories in which the examined places are located (historical geography and historical topography) has to be diachronic, taking into account the changes of landscape over the millennia (landscape archaeology).

Toponyms – it is crucial to repeat it, in order to properly fix this notion – are considered (especially in Europe and in the Indo-European context, where, currently, they are studied more in depth) very conservative and precious 'relict-forms' (or also 'relic-forms') and prehistoric onomastic linguistic 'fossils'. Place names – in different areas and times – often allow the linguists to trace back the origins of languages and to go back to the remote roots of a toponymic system and of a language, giving the opportunity to confirm or to deny theories and hypotheses and to establish an 'onomastic stratigraphy' of toponyms, hydronyms, and oronyms.

It is essential to verify, in different linguistic, societal, and cultural contexts, if the nature of onomastic 'fossils' or 'relics' (in any case the term is very peculiar, since, unlike physical 'fossils', generally they are linguistically productive) of toponymic roots can be ascribed also to the place names of a specific population without historical records. This can be more easily done in the coastal areas or along the rivers and in proximity of the bodies of water. This evaluation can be very useful in order to assess a) the linguistic change in presence of settlement dynamics and population movements and b) the possible conservatism of place names despite ethnic changes. In the first option, such an evaluation would allow researchers to hypothesize any irregular and specific, case-by-case, development of languages and onomastic indicators; in the second it would allow researchers to go back to the origins of a language even in the absence of historical documentation; therefore, outlining and demonstrating changes in populations.

discussion and the correction of the Dr Claudio Beretta's methodology and bibliography); Beretta, C., (2003), cit., pp. 5-225.

The scientific analysis of place names and hydronyms could be conclusive, significant, and decisive, in this context. The aforementioned stone-age people needed primarily, in order to live and to survive, to elaborate a sort of ‘ideal map’ of their world. In the absence of writing, they had to organize an ‘oral, intangible map’, composed by (place) names (phonic cross-reference marks), and the names they ‘invented’ and used were very close to their main needs, water, food, rock (caves to take a refuge or stones to get instruments), trees, animals. Places, ancestrally and/or in prehistoric ages, had probably really simple names. Moreover, they could have had the same names or very similar ones among themselves, not markedly differentiated except for categories, in order to distinguish different localities according to the indication of the main characteristics (in geomorphology and in natural resources) of their respective territories. Such a remark can help when it is necessary to reconstruct the etymological origins of a non-immediately-transparent place name.

To summarize, it is possible to state that this methodology can be interpreted as a new form of linguistic comparativism that tries to connect remote onomastic origins of place names belonging to a vast panorama of language families or proto-families, giving a contribution to the historical and historical-linguistic (or diachronic) study of population movements and settlement dynamics pertaining to different areas and contexts, inaugurating a new hermeneutic and versatile pattern in historical (or diachronic) linguistics. The aim of this approach is to trace back the etymological reconstruction as much as possible in time, in order to try to recover – without prejudices and bias of any kind – the most ancient origins (or ‘proto-origins’) of the analyzed languages.

Even if developed in the Indo-European languages field, this experimental methodology can be applied – in a not eminently historical-chronological key (because of the lack, at least partial, of historical and historical-linguistic documentation), but according to a diachronic approach – also to the general onomastics and toponomastics of non-Indo-European linguistic contexts, in particular to those of undocumented and/or endangered languages.

8. THE METHODOLOGY’S APPLICATION: TWO EXAMPLES

The following part of this paper briefly tries to show how it is possible to apply the experimental methodology outlined above to a largely undocumented language. This is done providing two targeted examples (systemic and coherent in themselves) from the South-East Asian context, using linguistic data from a specific area in Eastern Indonesia, near Timor, in particular from the Alor-Pantar islands and, specifically, from the Abui language¹⁷. The Alor-Pantar site (located along the islands of the Alor archipelago – geographic coordinates 8°15’S 124°45’E – near Timor, in Southern Indonesia, Figure 1) is very suitable for this experimental approach in diachronic toponomastics, because it lies in

¹⁷ About Alor-Pantar languages and Alor-Pantar etymological reconstructions, cf. Holton, G., Klamer, M., Kratochvíl, F., Robinson, L. C., Schapper, A., (2012), *passim*; Robinson, L. C., and Holton, G., (2012), pp. 59-87; Klamer, M., (2014), *passim*. About Abui, cf. Kratochvíl, F., (2007), *passim*; Kratochvíl, F., and Delpada, B., (2008), *passim*. Very interesting are also Kratochvíl, F., Fedden, S., Holton, G., Klamer, M., Robinson, L. C., Schapper, A., (2011), *passim*, and Fedden, S., Brown, D., Corbett, G., Holton, G., Klamer, M., Robinson, L. C., Schapper, A., (2013), *passim*.

an ancient language contact zone between the Papuan and Austronesian linguistic families, along one of the possible settlement routes to Australia. While no historical records are available, the site offers a unique opportunity to study societies relying on oral transmission of knowledge.

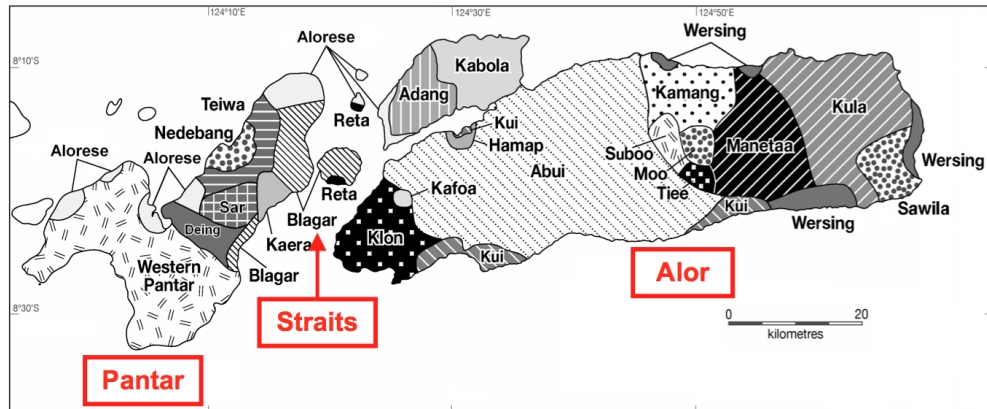


Figure 1: Map of the distribution of the Alor-Pantar languages of the Alor archipelago, Indonesia

The Alor-Pantar languages are a family of clearly related Papuan languages spoken on islands of the Alor archipelago. The family is conventionally divided into two branches, centered on the islands of Alor and Pantar. In order to simplify, summarily:

1) Alor branch:

Abui, Kamang (Woisika), Kui, Adang / Kabola (Straits, West-Alor, ‘border language[s]’), Klön (West-Alor), Kafoa (Jafoo), Sawila (East-Alor, Tanglapui language), Kula / Lamtoka (East Alor, Tanglapui language), Wersing / Kolana (East-Alor);

2) Pantar branch:

Teiwa, Kaera, Nedebang, Lamma (West-Pantar), Tubbe (West-Pantar), Mauta (West-Pantar), Retta, Blagar (or Blagar / Retta, Straits, East-Pantar / West-Alor, ‘border language[s]’).

Tereweng, plausibly a Blagar dialect (spoken on the Tereweng Island of the coast of Pantar), is, sometimes, classified as a separate language from Blagar. Blagar can also be considered as belonging to the Alor branch, as a West-Alor (Straits) language. Hamap, sometimes, is distinguished from Adang, even if it seems to be an Adang dialect. Kabola is socio-linguistically distinct from Adang, but is associated with it as language¹⁸. Abui, Kamang (Woisika), and Kabola should not be unitary languages.

From proto-Alor-Pantar (the original proto-language)¹⁹ should be derived Teiwa, Nedebang, Kaera, and the West Pantar group of languages (Mauta, Tubbe, Lamma), on one side, and Alor, on the other. From Alor would have been ‘originated’ the West Alor and East Alor sub-groups. West Alor should be the group of Klön and of the languages of the

¹⁸ Cf. Haan, J. W., (2001), *passim*.

¹⁹ Cf. Robinson, L. C., and Holton, G., (2012), *cit.*, pp. 59-87.

Straits, Blagar / Retta and Adang, East Alor would include Sawila and Wersing (Kolana). ‘Among’ West Alor and East Alor, the Alor group would incorporate also Kui, Abui, Kamang (Woisika), and – possibly – Kafoa (Jafoo)²⁰.

The ‘collector definition’ *proto-Alor-Pantar* can be considered as equivalent to *proto-Timor-Alor-Pantar*, because the languages not belonging to the Alor group seem not to constitute a specific connection in opposition to the Oirata-Makasai languages of East Timor and the Bunak language on the Timorese border. Malcom Ross has postulated the existence of a so-called “West-Timor” group including Alor-Pantar and Bunak²¹.

Abui toponymy can be a valuable test-bed for the convergent and experimental methodology outlined in this paper, because it can offer very clear examples of the application of diachronic toponomastics criteria to a language without historical documentation, passing from the micro-system of toponymy to the macro-system of historical / diachronic reconstruction of population movements and settlement dynamics and of the interpretation and description strategies, by speakers, of the landscape and territory. The study of names on the shores and along the internal communication routes can be useful in outlining changes or developments in trade routes and societal systems, for example. ‘Imported’ or ‘non-ancient’ forms in place names can indicate a change in population, the arrival of a new people, or the foundation of a new place (or the ‘re-founding’ – and ‘re-naming’ – of an old village).

9. AFENA HAPONG AND AFENA HIETANG

The first example, focused on the village names *Afena Hapong* and *Afena Hietang*, is inherent in the classification and analytical study of these two related place names. These two compounds show a ‘semantic specialization’ in their naming process. Starting the analysis from *Afena Hapong*, it is possible to classify the place name following the two different categories of criteria highlighted below (Tabel 1).

Tabel 1: *Diachronic toponomastics and historical semantics*

Diachronic Toponomastics	Historical Semantics
The onomastic source: “in front of” (<i>Hapong</i>);	Place name ‘transparent’ (self-evident) or unclear: <i>Hapong</i> is clear, <i>Afena</i> is clear only after the etymological reconstruction;
the primary and basic structure of the name: compound;	place name related to the primary goods: NO;
the ‘morphology’ of the name: ‘free morphemes’;	place name inherent or not inherent in a physical feature of the territory: spatial description;
the frequency in the toponymic system of the language: HIGH (<i>Afena</i>);	the place name is in itself a compound: YES;
the semantics and the links with hydro-geo-morphology: clear → “a hamlet in front of a village”.	the place name (or its root) shows a possible ‘semantic specialization’: YES.

²⁰ Cf. Holton, G., Klamer, M., Kratochvíl, F., Robinson, L. C., Schapper, A., (2012), cit., p. 114.

²¹ Cf. Ross, M., (2005), pp. 15-66.

The same classificatory process can be applied to *Afena Hietang*. Abui *Afena* / *afeng* derives from the proto-Alor-Pantar (pAP) form **haban*²², ‘translatable’, in a generic meaning, as ‘village’. Anyway, the most common word for ‘village’, in Abui, seems to be not *afena* / *afeng*, but *melang*, which should be equally and plausibly derived from the proto-form **haban*. In order to explain this dichotomy it is necessary to try to better define the two place names *Afena Hapong* and *Afena Hietang*.

Analyzing the phonetic structures of **haban* and *Afena*, we can safely assume that *Afena* derives from **haban*, **haban* → *Afena* (in Abui the passage **-b- = -f-* is widespread and regular). *Hapong* derives from a root / proto-form **(-)pong-* (**ha-* is a prefix meaning ‘(in) front of’ / ‘his face’, while *Hietang* (< **[-]tang-*, with **hie-* prefix) means ‘below’ / ‘border below’ (the opposite topographic and spatial indication, in Abui, is *poming*, meaning ‘above’). Both *Hapong* and *Hietang* characterize a part of a village and/or an area close to the village.

Investigating the semantics of these terms, it is possible to notice a ‘specialization’ of the form *afena* / *afeng* (< **haban*) in parallel to *melang* (< **haban*). While *melang* expresses the meaning of ‘village’ *tout court*, *afena* / *afeng* is oriented in describing parts of the village (‘hamlets’ or ‘localities’, for example) or areas located in the proximity of the same. Generally *afena* is used in place names (in the direct ‘making’ of toponyms and in their ‘official forms’), while *afeng* is prevailing in general use (to indicate a generic ‘hamlet’, for example, without the specific [place] name), even if the same *afeng* enters, sometimes, in the composition of toponyms.

Afena Hapong should mean ‘place in front of the village’, a space around the settlement. It is possible to notice a ‘semantic specialization’ of the form *Afena* (< **haban*), with the addition of *Hapong* (a sort of ‘spatial marker’ or ‘localizer’), because the name means not expressly ‘village’, but ‘hamlet in front of the village’, ‘place located in front of the village’. *Afena Hietang*, in turn, should be interpretable as ‘hamlet below’, ‘lower hamlet’, probably a part of a field close to the village.

Following this reconstruction, it is possible to differentiate the generic meaning of ‘village’ between *afena* / *afeng* and *melang*, even if they derive from the same proto-Alor-Pantar form (**haban*), attributing the meaning of ‘village’ *tout court* to *melang* (two examples can be *Filè Melang*, ‘thatch grass field village’, and *Lu Melang*, ‘village between two rivers’) and recognizing in *afena* / *afeng* an ‘onomastic (toponymic) semantic specialization’ in ‘hamlet’, ‘locality’, ‘area around the village’, ‘part of the village’.

This is a very important point, allowing interesting considerations about the perception and the interpretation of space and landscape by Abui people. Through (diachronic) toponomastics, in fact, it is possible to analyze the perception and the interpretation of space and landscape by speakers as well as it is presumable (or, at least, supposable) that through a comparison between language shift in toponymy and in general lexicon / onomastics it will be possible to evaluate morphological and grammatical changes in undocumented languages.

The anthropological annotation about landscape and territory’s space description and interpretation is associated, in this case, with a sample of ‘onomastic specialization’. Starting from the same proto-form, **haban*, the scholar can analyze two words, *afena* / *afeng* and *melang*, surely linked between themselves and probably synonyms in remote

²² Two valid and valuable supports for all current Abui etymological reconstructions are Holton, G., Klammer, M., Kratochvíl, F., Robinson, L. C., Schapper, A., (2012), cit., *passim*, and Klammer, M., 2014, cit., *passim*.

(antecedent) ages, that now are different (even if related) in their respective meanings, because of a ‘semantic specialization’ (in the semantic area of landscape and territory’s space) produced along the ‘naming process’.

This onomastic consideration is possible through the application of this diachronic toponomastics methodology that allows the scholars to test the semantic shift also through the lens of evidences from historical geography and landscape analysis, establishing the agreement of linguistic data with the topographic ones.

10. LAMANG TĀHA, LAMANG UWU, LALAMANG, AND LAALING: A ‘TOPONYMIC SYSTEM’ IN THE ABUI ‘INTANGIBLE ORAL MAP’

Starting from a related consideration about *melang*, it is possible to get to the second example from Abui. As mentioned, Abui *melang* means generically ‘village’ and it seems to be derived, same as the Abui *afena / afeng*, from the proto-form (proto-Alor-Pantar) **haban*. It is conceivable to hypothesize that the diachronic onomastic link between the proto-form (proto-Alor-Pantar) **haban* and Abui *melang* is represented by a word from another Alor-Pantar neighboring language, Kamang. The word in question is the Kamang ‘double form’ *mane / komang* (the two forms always appear together), meaning ‘village’, and it is presumably derived, as Abui *afena / afeng* and *melang*, from the proto-Alor-Pantar form **haban*²³. Abui, moreover, has an equivalent form *komang*, meaning ‘place with burned trees with remained blackened trunks’, a section of forest burned in order to make way for a village, and showing a clear ‘semantic specialization’ (even if it could be conceivable that the Abui meaning is the original, being the Kamang one a ‘normalization’ of the same).

It is possible, moreover, to recognize in the Abui ‘suffixal’ form **-mang* a contracted ‘variant’ of Abui *melang* (equivalent to **-mang* in Kamang *komang*, but – it is just a hypothesis – *melang* could be also a ‘contraction’ between the two Kamang forms *mane* and *komang*, ‘giving shape’, then, to **-mang*). The meaning of **-mang* is ‘place’, ‘village’, also attested, as just mentioned, in the forms *mane / komang* in the Kamang language. This **-mang*, therefore, could plausibly be a suffixal contracted form from *melang* (*melang* > **m[-el-]ang* > **-mang*), meaning always ‘place’, ‘village’ (and, possibly, in some cases, also ‘locality’, ‘hamlet’), equally derived and/or ‘produced’ from / by the proto-Alor-Pantar form **haban*. **-mang* is also recognized, by Abui native-speakers, as meaning ‘field for cultivating’ or ‘inhabited place’, semantic restitution that confirms this interpretation.

Through *melang / *-mang* it is possible to analyze the second example provided in this paper. Two villages, in Alor (Abui area), are called *Lamang Tāha* and *Lamang Uwo*. *Lamang* is / was considered unclear, in its meaning, while *Tāha* (< **tāh- / *tāha*) means ‘above’ and *Uwo* (< **^wo- / *^wwo*) means ‘below’ (they express, therefore, two very ‘transparent’ spatial indications / indicators). Another attested toponymic form (a village

²³ In Alor-Pantar languages the (complete in itself) form *mang* means also ‘domestic’, while *ko(-)*, probably a verbal form, means ‘to stay’. Abui, as told, has a word *komang* meaning ‘place with burned trees with remained blackened trunks’.

name), in Abui, is *Lalamang*, semantically interpretable as ‘village of the good wood for houses’. In order to try to reconstitute the sense of the names of the two Abui villages called *Lamang*, it could be useful to outline a ‘segmentation’ of the other toponym, *Lalamang*. **La-lamang* shows the form **-lamang* preceded by **la-*; **Lala-mang* seems to indicate (as **La-lamang*, in any case) a reduplication of **la-* before the suffixal contracted form **-mang*, meaning ‘village’.

Both segmentations seem effective, because the meaning of **-mang*, as mentioned above, is ‘village’, ‘inhabited place’, so the second part of this ‘compound form’ is ‘transparent’. The root **la-* has been recognized by our native-speaker as meaning ‘good wood’, ‘good wood for houses’. It is very likely, if not safe, therefore, that the form **lala-*, in *Lalamang* (**Lala-mang*), derives from the reduplication of the original root **la-*, a non-rare phenomenon in Abui toponymy and in the ‘historical making’ of place names in other Papuan – and also Austronesian²⁴ – languages (and developed in all the language families of the world. Also in Indo-European, where it is not so widespread, in fact, it is possible to analyze some forms of reduplication of the original stem in toponymy, related, for example, to the **kar-* / **kal-* root²⁵). *Lalamang* shows, therefore, this quite common process, in toponymy, the original root’s reduplication of a place name. Hypothesizing a common root **la-* for *Lamang Tāha*, *Lamang Uwo*, and *Lalamang*, it is possible to read *Lalamang* as the result of this reduplication process.

The meaning of all the three Abui place names (*Lamang Tāha*, *Lamang Uwo*, and *Lalamang*) is linked to a renewable natural source (**la-* = ‘good wood for houses’) and to the toponymic, spatial indication of ‘village’, ‘inhabited place’, expressed by **-mang* (= *melang*). Oddly, our native-speaker does not immediately recognize the meaning of the root **la-* (= ‘good wood for houses’)²⁶ in the ‘simple’ forms, *Lamang Tāha* and *Lamang Uwo*, but only in the form with root’s reduplication, *Lalamang*. Abui speakers, in any case, ‘translate’ sometimes *lamang* as ‘place where to store food and water for working / farming’, often with a semantic link to the activity of cutting and collecting wood. This linguistic ‘fact’ allows another remark about the loss, by speakers, over time, of the remote meaning of roots and forms, loss that is at the origin, as mentioned, of the natural process of paronymy in toponymy. By applying the established criteria of this convergent, experimental methodology to these three place names, it is possible to reconstitute the correct meaning of two place names so far considered unclear, but whose meanings are linked – it is important to highlight it, in order to be able to semantically classify the three toponyms – to a renewable natural source (**la-* = ‘good wood for houses’) and to the spatial indication of ‘village’, ‘inhabited place’, expressed by **-mang* (= *melang*).

Moreover, another Abui place name considered unclear, *Laaling*, could be explained, at least in its stem, through this reasoning, hypothesizing also for it a reduplication of the root **la-* and the fall of the second /l/ that made this place name ‘non-transparent’, according to this reconstruction, *Laaling* < **la(-l-)aling* (> **la-aling* > **lāling*). Probably it is not a case that our native-speaker ‘translates’ this place name as ‘place after burning’ (*tōlāling* means ‘a fire spread everywhere’ and that interpretation of the place name can indicate a place where people burned trees in order to build a village

²⁴ Personal comment by Prof. Gérard Diffloth.

²⁵ Cf., e.g., Perono Cacciafoco, F., (2008), pp. 13-24; Perono Cacciafoco, F., (2015), pp. 33-48.

²⁶ In Abui the word *la* means ‘palm tree’, but in our native-speaker’s perception it seems not related to this root **la-* with the highlighted and mentioned meaning (even if it is always inherent in wood).

with ‘the good wood for houses’, a previous stage in the place’s foundation process), but also as ‘place after wood’s collection’, very indicative semantic restitution. The double /a/ of *Laaling*, possibly transcribed also as *Lāling*, can be derived from the fall of /l/.

This application of the methodology has allowed us to reconstruct not only the etymological origins of place names from an undocumented language, but, in this case, also a ‘toponymic system’, composed by place names strictly related to each other (the ‘ideal map’ of speakers), and to develop a precise outline of a ‘systemic’ – indeed – part of the toponymic ‘intangible cartography’ of Alor (Abui area).

11. CONCLUSIONS

As the two examples provided above show, the new methodology proposed in this paper allows the reconstruction of essential aspects of the diachronic development of the naming process in endangered languages. Through the application of this experimental methodology based on diachronic toponomastics criteria to the Abui toponymy it could be possible to reconstitute not only the ‘remote stratigraphy’ of place names, hydronyms, and oronyms, as outlined in this article, but also the speakers’ interpretation of the environment, their perception of landscape, and their description of territory. Through this original methodology, above all, it could be possible to shed some light on the ancient origins of the analyzed languages and, crossing the linguistic data with data from other disciplines, to go back in time until the ancestral origins of populations and their cultures.

The study of diachronic toponomastics applied to the reconstruction of the morphological structure and meaning of place names can provide valuable data also about people’s movements and settlement dynamics over time. Additionally, when the linguistic change is comparable or connectable between toponymy and the general lexicon of a specific language, the diachronic study of place names could support, in some cases, the reconstruction and the description of phenomena in the general onomastics of that language.

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