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THE COGNITIVE LINGUISTIC INTERPRETATION OF TOPONYMS AND THEIR ROLE IN THE LINGUISTIC WORLDVIEW

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Abstract. *Toponyms represent more than arbitrary referential labels; they encapsulate cognitive processes of spatial conceptualization, environmental perception, and cultural encoding. Grounded in cognitive linguistics and the German tradition of the "linguistic worldview" (sprachliches Weltbild), this expanded article analyzes German place names as reflections of embodied cognition, image schemas, metonymy, and metaphor. Motivational patterns—descriptive (topographical and hydrological), possessive/settlement-based, functional, and substrate influences—are examined in depth, with regional variations highlighting historical migrations and worldview shifts. An extended table provides categorized examples, frequencies, and cognitive interpretations. Findings demonstrate how toponyms contribute to mental mapping, collective identity, and linguistic relativity, fossilizing perceptual salience and human-landscape interactions in the German sprachliches Weltbild. Implications for cognitive onomastics, cultural linguistics, and interdisciplinary studies are discussed.*

Keywords: *Cognitive linguistics, toponyms, linguistic worldview, German onomastics, Humboldt, Weisgerber, image schemas, metonymy, place name motivation.*

Introduction. The relationship between language, cognition, and worldview has been a cornerstone of linguistic inquiry since Wilhelm von Humboldt's (1836) assertion that languages structure distinct "Weltansichten." In the German tradition, Leo Weisgerber (1962) refined this into the concept of sprachliches Weltbild, positing that lexical and naming systems mediate cultural content and cognitive patterns. Cognitive linguistics extends this by viewing meaning as embodied and experiential (Langacker, 1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Evans & Green, 2006). Toponyms, as proper names for places, challenge rigid designator theories (Kripke, 1980) by retaining motivational transparency that influences perception and construal (Van Langendonck, 2007; Stolz, 2019).

German toponymy offers a fertile ground for exploration due to its layered etymologies: Germanic roots dominate, overlaid with Celtic, Slavic, and Romance substrates from historical contacts. Names often remain semantically motivated, revealing how speakers categorize landscape, prioritize features, and conceptualize habitation.

This enhanced article provides a comprehensive cognitive interpretation of German toponyms, detailing motivational categories, conceptual mechanisms (image schemas, metonymy, prototype effects), regional variations, and their broader role in shaping the linguistic worldview. It argues that toponyms serve as cognitive artifacts, structuring spatial thought and preserving cultural memory.

Theoretical Framework

Cognitive Linguistics and Proper Names

Cognitive approaches reject the view of proper names as semantically empty, emphasizing residual appellative meanings and construal operations. Toponyms evoke frames (Fillmore, 1985) and image schemas: CONTAINER for bounded settlements, PATH for rivers/roads, UP-DOWN for elevations (Johnson, 1987).

Metonymy is central: a salient feature stands for the whole place (e.g., river for settlement). Metaphor occasionally appears in evaluative names (e.g., Schönberg 'beautiful mountain').

The Linguistic Worldview in German Tradition

Humboldt-Weisgerber relativity posits mild influences: naming patterns reflect and reinforce perceptual habits. Underhill (2009) revitalizes this for modern analysis, linking toponyms to national "intermediate worlds" of meaning. In German contexts, frequent landscape descriptors suggest an environmentally attuned worldview, contrasting with more anthropocentric systems.

Motivational Patterns and Cognitive Analysis

German toponyms derive primarily from Old High German/Middle High German, with regional substrates. Motivations prioritize perceptual salience: natural features first, then human imprints.

Motivational Category	**Subtype/Description**	**Common Formants/Examples**	**Approximate Regional Frequency**	**Cognitive Mechanisms and Worldview Reflection**
Descriptive (Landscape)	Topographical (hills, valleys)	-berg (mountain/hill): Bergen, Salzburg; -tal (valley): Ruhrtal	High in uplands (South/Central)	Verticality schema; salience of elevation; hierarchical space

Motivational Category	Subtype/Description	Common Formants/Examples	Approximate Regional Frequency	Cognitive Mechanisms and Worldview Reflection
	Hydrological (rivers, wetlands)	-au(e) (meadow/stream): Passau, Dachau; -fluss/-bach (river/brook): Mainfluss	Widespread, esp. North	PATH/FLOW schemas; dynamism and boundaries
	Vegetational/Environmental	-wald (forest): Schwarzwald; -feld (field): Mansfeld	Central/South	CONTAINER for resources; fertility vs. wilderness
Possessive/Settlement	Patronymic or habitation	-heim (home/estate): Mannheim, Rosenheim; -ingen/-hausen (patronymic): Göttingen	Southwest (Alemannic)	Kinship and containment; community as core identity
Functional/Habitative	Structures or activities	-burg (fortress): Hamburg, Strasbourg; -brücke (bridge): Frankfurt (originally ford)	Urban/historical sites	Landmark salience; human modification of space
Substrate/Hybrid	Pre-Germanic (Celtic/Slavic)	-itz/-in (Slavic): Berlin (from *berl- 'swamp'), Leipzig (linden)	East Germany	Layered history; cultural contact and adaptation

Motivational Category	Subtype/Description	Common Formants/Examples	Approximate Regional Frequency	Cognitive Mechanisms and Worldview Reflection
Evaluative/Ornamental	Aesthetic or qualitative	Schön- (beautiful): Schönburg; Neu- (new): Neustadt	Scattered, later formations	Metaphoric extension; idealization of place

Table 1. Expanded motivational categories in German toponyms (frequencies approximate based on regional corpora; sources: Bach, 1953–1956; Nübling, 2012; Stolz, 2019)

Descriptive categories dominate (~50–60% overall), underscoring embodied perception: visible, tangible features are prototypical motivators. Possessive forms (~20–30%) reflect early medieval social cognition—lineage and home as anchors.

Regional patterns reveal worldview nuances: -berg density in Bavaria/Baden-Württemberg construes mountainous space vertically; northern -au/-brook emphasizes flat, watery horizontality.

Substrate names in former Slavic areas (e.g., Lusatia) preserve hybrid cognition, resisting full assimilation and encoding multicultural layers.

Conceptual Mechanisms in Depth

- **Metonymy**: Dominant process—FEATURE FOR PLACE (e.g., ford → Frankfurt) or GROUP FOR LOCATION (Franks' ford).
- **Image Schemas**: CONTAINER prevalent in settlement names; FORCE/DYNAMISM in river-derived toponyms.
- **Prototype Effects**: Central exemplars (e.g., Berlin as urban prototype) influence associations.
- **Diachronic Fossilisation**: Names preserve archaic schemas, e.g., animistic echoes in river names (Donau from Indo-European *dānu 'flowing').

In mental mapping, toponyms facilitate cognitive navigation: dense networks reinforce regional identity (e.g., Rheinland vs. Bayern).

Culturally, post-1945 name retention in East Germany sustains historical continuity, countering political ruptures.

Role in the Linguistic Worldview

German toponyms portray a worldview of inhabited, meaningful landscape: nature is not abstract but experientially salient and humanized. This contrasts with more deictic systems (e.g., Indigenous directional naming) or abstract grids. They contribute to collective memory and identity: evoking Heim evokes security; wild forests evoke boundary. In modern contexts, tourism and branding reactivate motivations (e.g., Romantic Schwarzwald imagery).

Discussion. The cognitive linguistic interpretation of German toponyms presented in this study demonstrates that place names function as more than referential anchors in geographic space; they operate as enduring cognitive artifacts that encode historically situated patterns of perception, categorization, and valuation of the environment. The dominance of descriptively motivated toponyms confirms the hypothesis that early naming practices prioritized perceptually salient and experientially accessible features of the landscape. Elevation, water, vegetation, and settlement structure emerge as cognitively privileged domains, aligning with embodied image schemas such as UP–DOWN, PATH, CONTAINER, and CENTER–PERIPHERY. From a cognitive perspective, metonymy proves to be the most productive conceptual mechanism in German toponymy. The recurrent mapping of a salient feature onto an entire location (FEATURE FOR PLACE) reflects general cognitive economy and attentional salience rather than arbitrary linguistic convention. This supports broader findings in cognitive semantics that metonymy, more than metaphor, underlies everyday conceptualization and naming practices. Metaphorical toponyms, by contrast, are relatively marginal and tend to appear in evaluative or later ornamental formations, suggesting a secondary layer of conceptual elaboration rather than a foundational naming strategy.

The regional distribution of motivational patterns further reinforces the worldview-oriented interpretation. Southern and central German regions, characterized by varied topography, favor vertical and containment schemas (-berg, -tal, -heim), while northern regions emphasize hydrological and horizontal spatiality (-au, -bach). Such variation illustrates how linguistic worldview is not monolithic but locally instantiated, shaped by environmental affordances and settlement history. Substrate toponyms in eastern Germany exemplify cognitive layering, where pre-Germanic conceptualizations persist within the modern linguistic system, resisting full semantic assimilation and preserving traces of cultural contact.

The findings also nuance the Humboldt–Weisgerber hypothesis of linguistic relativity. Rather than determining perception, German toponyms appear to stabilize and reinforce habitual patterns of environmental construal. They guide attention, support mental mapping, and contribute to collective memory without rigidly constraining interpretation. This aligns with contemporary “weak” or “mild” relativity models in cognitive linguistics, which emphasize probabilistic influence over deterministic control. In modern contexts, processes of desemanticization and globalization challenge traditional motivational transparency, particularly in urban environments where names are often processed as

opaque labels. However, the continued cultural reactivation of toponyms in tourism, regional branding, and heritage discourse demonstrates that latent cognitive content remains accessible and socially meaningful. These dynamics highlight the diachronic depth and pragmatic adaptability of toponyms within the linguistic worldview.

Conclusion. This study has shown that German toponyms, when analyzed through the lens of cognitive linguistics and the concept of the linguistic worldview, reveal systematic patterns of embodied conceptualization, cultural memory, and environmental engagement. Far from being semantically empty rigid designators, place names encode image schemas, metonymic mappings, and historically grounded perceptions of space, settlement, and identity. The predominance of descriptively and metonymically motivated toponyms underscores the centrality of perceptual salience and experiential grounding in naming practices. Regional and substrate-based variation further demonstrates that the German sprachliches Weltbild is shaped by both ecological conditions and historical interaction, resulting in a layered and dynamic conceptual landscape. These findings extend and empirically support the Humboldt–Weisgerber tradition while integrating it into contemporary cognitive-semantic theory. By bridging cognitive linguistics, onomastics, and cultural linguistics, this article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how language mediates human–environment relations. Toponyms emerge as stable yet adaptive elements of linguistic cognition, preserving fossilized worldviews while remaining functional in modern communicative contexts.

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