1. One could make the general observation on Hungarian literature dealing with phonological history that researchers mostly consider common word data when examining sound change processes. Such studies rarely focus on other groups of linguistic elements (more specifically, on proper names), in other words, up until the most recent times, researchers used toponyms and anthroponyms to illustrate only a few phenomena in phonological history.

2. Even on such rare occasions, the toponymic data considered for explanatory purposes almost always had an element to which some common word corresponds; that is to say, even in these cases it is a common word element that is in the focus of the examination. Therefore, I will consider the possible benefits of adding toponyms to the source materials on which linguistic history relies.

Toponyms preserved in written documents are one of the most important primary sources for the study of Old Hungarian. There is little else for such studies to rely on because from the first centuries of written Hungarian records, apart from Hungarian language texts consisting of barely a few hundred words, almost all of the sources that still exist are Latin language charters. These do, however, include a high number of toponyms and anthroponyms recorded in Hungarian.

Besides having documented data from the earliest times, another advantage of toponyms is that they are bound in time and to an area; consequently, these linguistic elements can be examined not only in themselves, as separate lexemes, but also within their onomastic environment. Such an extended analysis then makes it possible to line out both the linguistic and the non-linguistic contexts of individual toponyms, and in this way carry out linguistic history studies with more accurate results. These two circumstances explain why far greater importance may be attributed to toponymic data than to common words.

3. In order to appropriately assess the value that proper names – and, in particular, toponyms – have as primary sources, the systematic differences between toponyms and common words first have to be identified. The reason
why doing so is important is that this information is a prerequisite for deciding whether to use toponyms only as sources in the exploration of the changes of toponyms, or to use them more generally in the study of historical linguistic, and, more specifically, historical phonological changes of the Hungarian language. (See also KENYHERCZ 2008: 179.)

Previously, several Hungarian linguists held that proper names change slower than common words. According to this view the phonological and morphological changes relevant to these two groups of linguistic elements are roughly the same, but, in the case of toponyms, they become apparent much later, and also run their course much slower (BENKŐ 1967: 375). Yet another view is that proper names, and within that group, toponyms, are definitely distinct from other elements of the word corpus, with regard to both phonology and morphology (BALÁZS 1970: 296).

In contrast, the latest studies of historical linguistics and phonology demonstrate that proper names undergo the same phonological changes as common words. This is shown by data such as the development of the Slavic word brat > Hungarian common word barát ‘friend, friar’, and that of the toponym Slavic Blatin > Hungarian Balaton, with both changes triggered by a word-initial consonant cluster. In the Hungarian version of the word, the consonant cluster was resolved by the insertion of a vowel in both cases. The latter is not the only example, however: the parallel insertion of the l sound into both the common word and the toponymic lexemes can also be registered as a similar change. Such a change may be observed both in the common words bődog > boldog ‘happy’, ód > old ‘dissolve, loosen’ and the toponyms Garbóc > Garbolc, Csegőd > Csegöld. There is no difference whatsoever between the two word types (TÓTH 2004a: 454).

The underlying cause of these phenomena is that once it has been formed, any toponym will be added to the mental-cognitive system of the community of name-users as an independent lexical unit. Therefore, even though toponyms often have common word origins, by having become a proper name, a newly formed toponym will lose its ties to its common-word antecedents. From this point onwards, the changes of the given toponym will be realized as the changes of an independent lexical unit. This may even entail processes of phonological changes which occur in the toponym independently from the common word corresponding to it. Such is the case, for example, of the toponym Németi (c.f. német ‘German’ ethnonym + -i derivative suffix), which, in many instances, developed into Nemti, as the vowel of the second syllable dropped out – without, however, the corresponding common word, németek ‘Germans’ undergoing a similar change, in spite of the phonological structure satisfying the prerequisites of such a change (TÓTH 2004b: 204–205). Thus, generally speaking, the
processes involving names and those involving common words can, indeed, be seen as being identical, that is, from the aspect of sound changes, it is irrelevant whether a particular word is a toponym or a common word. Then again, the process in the course of which such changes occur, and often the end results as well—for a number of complex reasons—can be different within the groups of linguistic elements (KENYHERCZ 2008: 180).

In the conventional literature on historical linguistics, proper names are considered as belonging to the less changeable, relatively permanent layer of word corpora, and within the group of proper names, experts see toponyms as the most archaic layer of corpora. In contrast to such hypotheses, more thorough investigations show toponyms to indeed preserve archaic features, but also to manifest neological phenomena with a similar frequency. One archaic feature of toponyms is the preservation of the primary monyoró form of the plant name mogyoró ‘hazel’, e.g. Monyoród (1394: Monorod), Monyorókerék (1221/1240/1774: Monyorókerék), Monyorós (1330/1477: Monyorus) (TÓTH 2004b: 191).

For a neological feature, toponyms of the type Nemti, mentioned above, can be referred back to, and the case of the toponymic form Besnyő, existing alongside the form Besenyő can also be considered as belonging to this category.

4. It should also be noted that by studying toponyms, far more information can be gathered on individual linguistic phenomena than by limiting the scope to common words. For example, the Hungarian appellative eszterág ‘stork’ is a loan word of Slavic origins (*strk > stьrkь ‘stork’) that entered the Hungarian language from one of the Southern Slavic languages. The lexeme started with a consonant cluster initially, and this is the form in which it appears in Hungarian sources even as late as the 14th and the 15th centuries (1395: ʃtrak, 1405: ʒtrag). In the Hungarian language version, the initial consonant cluster was resolved by the insertion of a vowel before the cluster, e.g. 1519: eztrag, 1533: Ezterag. This is all that can be uncovered by studying the common word examples. Possibilities can, however, be broadened by extending the scope of study to toponymic data containing the word eszterág. While the examination of toponymic data will not alter the facts previously established, nevertheless with toponymic data being precisely localizable and attributable to specific communities of speaker-listeners, an image can be formed of the territorial coverage of the lexeme and the community of those who used it (KENYHERCZ 2008: 177, 2013: 15).

In the Southern part of Hungary, in the county of Baranya, there is a settlement called Eszterágpuszta, which was independent during the Árpád-era. There are three pieces of early data on the settlement, 1329/14 c.: Straak, 1336: Ztraak (Gy. 1: 301), 1338: Ztraak (Cs. 2: 529). These pieces of data—due to the fact
that they can be precisely localized – make it possible to examine the context of the toponym. The data piece Ztraak, from the year 1336, appears next to toponyms the phonological structures of which satisfy Hungarian language syllable-construction rules. This means, amongst other criteria, the absence of initial consonant clusters, e.g. the toponyms Szalonta (1336: Zalanta), Szilvás (1336: Zilvas), Aranyos (1336: Aranus) (A. 3: 277).

Not far from the county of Baranya, in the county of Zala, there is another name of similar origin. The available data shows the word initial consonant cluster of the toponym from the county of Zala to be resolved, e.g. 1359: Istrog, 1408: Eztreh (Cs. 3: 51). What can be seen here is a name used in two different forms, both of which can be traced back to a common etymon. Actually, these examples represent two different ways in which a linguistic change can manifest, i.e. the resolution of the word initial cluster and, in contrast, its temporary preservation. Based on these observations, the toponym (and the common word upon which it is based) can be presumed to be in use in the form having a consonant cluster in some parts of the territory inhabited by Hungarian speaker-listeners of the 14th century (KENYHERCZ 2013: 15–17).

The phonotactic patterns originating from the Finno-Ugric root language determine the structure of Hungarian words. The Finno-Ugric root language (with the exception of a few onomatopoetic words) had no word initial consonant clusters (BAKRÓ-NAGY 1998: 235). Speaker-listeners of the Hungarian language, upon their arrival in the Carpathian Basin in the 9th century, met a large Slavic population, in whose language words beginning with consonant clusters were frequent. The Hungarian language, however – in accordance with the rules on syllable structures that it brought along as part of the Finno-Ugric legacy – was driven towards eliminating word initial consonant clusters. Then again, this could not be realized without any exceptions for several possible reasons. As the original phonological structures, containing consonant clusters, remained unchanged in several words of Slavic (and other language) origins, the phonotactic patterns characteristic of Hungarian gradually also changed. These changed phonotactic rules, in turn – under certain circumstances – allow for the presence of word initial consonant clusters in Hungarian (KENYHERCZ 2013: 195–203). This also implies that it was the very changes which the phonotactic rules were undergoing at the time that made it possible for the 1336: Ztraak form to exist in the language of the community concerned.

With the aforementioned in mind, I think that by extending the scope of historical phonological research to toponyms, the range of possibilities could be broadened with a new aspect, and they could also help to better understand individual phenomena. In some cases, however, there are limitations to doing so. Because the survival of charters – mainly due to historical and cultural
historical reasons – is often haphazard, their presence is not homogeneous in all parts of the territory inhabited by speakers of the Hungarian language. The effect of such limitations, however, can be partially mitigated by reviewing general considerations of historical linguistics and possibly by involving other linguistic corpora.

References


Abstract

The conclusions drawn by Hungarian historical phoneticians and phonologists are typically based on common words, while proper names, including toponyms, are only sporadically used to illustrate phonological changes. In older periods of Hungarian language history, however, the toponyms preserved in written documents can become most important sources. This essay focuses on the potential benefits of using toponyms for researching historical sound changes in Hungarian illustrated by the changes occurring in the phonotactic structure of names.

Toponyms preserved in old diplomas are indispensable sources for the phonological history of the old Hungarian period. In the early centuries of the Hungarian kingdom only charters written in Latin contained – and have preserved to this day – certain elements of the Hungarian language mainly in the form of place names and personal names. These elements are almost the only sources of the early periods of Hungarian language history.

Toponyms are strongly determined by chronological and territorial conditions and, therefore, it follows that a place name maybe studied not only in itself but also in the framework of other names that surround it, which makes it possible to examine both the linguistic and non-linguistic context of toponyms and define the results of historical linguistic research with greater precision.

Keywords: toponyms, historical sound changes, historical phonology