SEMANTIC FIELDS IN U.S. OIKONYMY: GEOGRAPHY, RELIGION, AND COMMEMORATION

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Annotation. This article explores the semantic fields that shape the naming of inhabited places (oikonyms) in the United States, focusing on three dominant categories: geography, religion, and commemoration. The study examines how each semantic field contributes to the cultural and linguistic character of U.S. place names, often overlapping and revealing layers of historical, ideological, and environmental influence. Geographic names frequently describe natural features and reflect linguistic heritage; religious names convey spiritual values and colonial missions; commemorative names preserve memory and assert cultural power. By analyzing examples across regions and historical periods, the paper demonstrates how these fields intersect and evolve.

Keywords: Toponymy, Oikonymy, Place Names, United States, Semantic Fields, Geography, Religion, Commemoration, Naming Practices, Cultural Geography.

Main text. The naming of places - in particular inhabited places or settlements (oikonyms) - in the United States provides insight into how human communities conceptualise their environment, identity and memory. In onomastics (the study of names), place-names are more than mere labels: they encode meanings, cultural values, historical contingencies and power relations. In the U.S. context, three semantic fields in particular stand out in the domain of oikonymy (and more broadly, settlement and populated-place names): (1) geography/nature (how the environment and landscape is referenced), (2) religion (how belief systems and religious heritage shape names), and (3) commemoration (how persons, events or institutions are memorialised through naming). This article explores each of these fields in turn, considers their interactions, and reflects on their implications for understanding U.S. cultural geography and naming practices.

A foundational force in naming places is the descriptive reference to physical landscapes, characteristic natural features and environmental observation. According to the general field of toponymy, many place-names are "feature names" – hydronyms, oronyms, vegetation names – that reflect the environment. [1, p. 2] For instance, the Encyclopaedia Britannica defines toponymy as concerned with the "motive behind the naming of the place (historical and geographical aspects)" and divides habitation and feature names accordingly. [2, p. 1]

In the U.S., this means that many town and settlement names derive directly from physical or topographic characteristics: e.g., "Green Valley", "Clear Lake", "Rocky Mount", "Long Prairie", and similar formations. Such names reflect the immediate landscape or what settlers observed upon arrival, thus embedding a geography-based semantic field. Moreover, the language of naming often preserves older lexical forms or indigenous words applied to natural features, which then become oikonyms or settlement names. For example, towns in Utah or the American West may retain Native American names referring to local vegetation or geology (e.g., the town of Koosharem, Utah derives from a Piute word for the valley named for deep red clover) [3].

Furthermore, the geography semantic field in U.S. oikonymy is layered with linguistic heritage: indigenous names (e.g., Mississippi, Minnesota), Spanish names (e.g., Los Angeles, Rio Grande), French names (e.g., Des Moines) and English descriptive forms (e.g.,

Pleasant Hill). The mixture reflects successive waves of settlement, colonisation and linguistic contact. In many cases the generic part of the toponym (-ville, -burg, town, city) is appended to descriptive or landscape-based specifics. For example, town names like "Clear Lake City" or "Grand Prairie Town" emphasise descriptive landscape matter. As one geography textbook shows: generic toponyms (Centre, Corners, etc.) provide clues to settlement patterns and cultural region spread [4, p. 164].

Thus, the geography/nature semantic field functions on at least three levels: (a) **descriptive naming** based on visible physical features; (b) **linguistic layering/heritage**, reflecting settlement history; (c) **heritage retention** of older or indigenous names that refer to geography.

Beyond descriptive geography, many U.S. place-names reflect religious motive, heritage or aspiration. Such names include saints' names, biblical place names, references to Christian concepts or virtues, and denominational or church-based settlement names [5, p. 1]

In English-speaking colonial and post-colonial America, settlers often gave names such as Bethlehem, Nazareth, Zion, Providence, Salem (from Hebrew "shalom" meaning peace) to their towns in order to infuse them with a religious or utopian aspiration. [6, p. 2] In Spanish and French colony-derived regions the use of "San …", "Santa …", "St. …" is widespread (e.g., San Antonio, Santa Fe, St. Mary's).

Importantly, religious naming is not only functional but symbolic: it situates the new settlement within a religious worldview, signifying piety, hope or identity. Over time, the religious aura may fade, and the name becomes secularised, yet the origin remains embedded (as noted in the Washington Post piece) [5, p. 1]. The choice of biblical or saint names also reflects cultural geopolitics: for example, Catholic missionary naming in the Southwest vs. Protestant settlement naming in New England.

Thus, the religion semantic field contributes a second significant layer to U.S. oikonymy: beyond what the land is, the name reflects what the settlers hoped or believed it to be.

A third robust semantic field in U.S. place-naming is commemoration: naming places after persons, events, institutions, symbolic ideals or historical occurrences. The federal report by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) explains: "Naming … after individuals was one way settlers marked the land… Even today, naming geographic features after individuals helps us to recognise their special achievements and contributions …" [7, p. 1]

In settlement naming, this appears in towns or cities named after national figures (Washington, Jefferson, Madison), explorers (Hudson), local founders, or veterans. The classification of toponyms often lists "commemorative names (honours a famous or important person)" as one major category [4, p. 164]. Commemorative naming is distinct from descriptive or religious naming because it encodes memory and symbolic value: naming becomes a form of honouring, remembering, legitimising.

For example, the process of renaming the U.S. highest peak from "Mount McKinley" (named after President McKinley) back to the indigenous "Denali" reflects tensions in commemorative naming, power and heritage. The policy of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names (BGN) highlights that commemoration must satisfy criteria, and that derogatory or offensive names should be changed [3]. The BGN's procedures make clear how institutional decisions shape commemoration through naming. Thus, the commemoration semantic field includes: (a) **honouring persons or events**, (b) **institutional naming and power**, (c) **renaming/contest-naming** (i.e., changes due to cultural shifts).

In U.S. oikonymy, the commemoration field often overlaps with geography or religion: a "St Mary's College Town" may reference religion and person, or "Grant County" may reference a person and geography.

For example, generic toponym classification (e.g., Stewart's classification, via textbooks) includes descriptive, commemorative, religious, manufactured, shift, etc. [4, p. 164] The interplay means that a name like "Zion Valley" might refer partly to biblical aspiration (religion) and partly to a geographic valley (nature). Or "Mount Jefferson" ties a peak (geography) to a person (commemoration).

The interaction also plays out diachronically. The first naming impulse often draws from the physical landscape (geography). As settlement matures, religious or identity-motives may guide naming. As communities stabilise, commemoration becomes more common (honouring founders, war heroes, civic figures). Over time, renaming may occur to reflect changing values-e.g., removing derogatory terms, restoring indigenous names, contesting commemorative figures. The BGN's policy on naming and renaming underscores this [3]. Scholars of hybrid toponyms show how linguistic and cultural layering reflect intersection of geographies and settlement histories (e.g., English-Spanish hybrid names in the U.S.) [8].
Studying U.S. settlement names through semantic fields has several implications:

- **Cultural insight**: The prevalence of religious names in certain regions or commemorative names in others offers clues to settlement origin, culture and identity. As the Washington Post article noted, over 1,000 biblically-named towns exist in the U.S. [6, p. 2]
- **Linguistic contact & heritage**: The layering of indigenous, Spanish, French, English naming traditions reveals language contact and settlement history. Hybrid toponyms highlight cultural merger [8].
- **Power and memory**: Naming is a claim to the land, a way of memorialising and controlling. Commemorative naming reflects who is remembered, whose contributions matter, and whose identities are foregrounded. Renaming processes reflect evolving social values (e.g., removal of derogatory names) [3].
- **Semantic typology for analysis**: Onomasticians can categorise names as descriptive/geographic, religious, commemorative (plus other types) and thereby study naming patterns quantitatively and qualitatively. Textbook classifications (e.g., Stewart's categories) support this [4, p. 164]
- **Geo-temporal layering**: The naming framework helps in tracing historical layers: first nature/geography, then religious/ideological, then commemorative, then renaming. Researchers could develop corpora of U.S. place names and classify them accordingly to test hypotheses about settlement era, origin, language, culture.
- **Renaming and contestation**: Contemporary naming debates (e.g., replacing derogatory names or restoring indigenous names) illustrate active processes through which naming continues to matter politically and culturally [3].

Conclusion. In the United States, the naming of inhabited places is shaped by more than simple description: it is shaped by a triad of semantic fields-geography (nature/land), religion (belief/heritage) and commemoration (memory/honour). Geography gives the first layer of meaning by referencing the landscape; religion adds identity and aspiration; commemoration embeds memory and cultural politics. These fields overlap, evolve, and reflect the complex cultural geography of U.S. settlement. Applying semantic-field analysis to U.S. oikonymy offers rich insights for onomastics, historical geography and cultural studies. Future research might apply such typologies to large datasets of U.S. place-names to uncover patterns by era, region, language and naming motivation.

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