Crossing perspectives on onomastic methodology: Reflections on fieldwork in place name research. An essay in interactional onomastics

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1. Introduction*

Onomastics developed as an academic discipline in the course of the 19th century, although research on proper names can look back on a much longer tradition (see De Stefani and Pepin 2010 for a synopsis). In the second half of the century place names aroused a particularly fervent interest among both philologists and geographers. The preoccupations of the former were mainly etymological and dialectological, as testified by the works of e.g. Flechia (1871, 1874) and Ascoli (1879). The latter hoped that the etymological explanations would allow them to describe the ‘original’ topography of a location. The geographer William Hughes (1867) proposed etymological interpretations of place names, stating however that geography should go beyond the mere analysis of names. Others, like the Swiss geographer Johann Jacob Egli focused much more heavily on place names. In his Nomina geographica, Egli (1872) offers a thorough illustration of his method of analysis and classification across 270 pages. Fourteen years later he would be the author of the first ‘History of geographical onomastics’ (Geschichte der geographischen Namenkunde, 1886), offering a detailed overview of place name research from Antiquity to his own time. Place names have also been central to other disciplines, such as anthropology, as Franz Boas’ memorable (1934) study of the Geographical names of the Kwakiutl Indians testifies.

The historical exploration of place names – and of names in general – is firmly rooted in investigations of human culture and continues to be the central preoccupation of onomacists. It seems however that onomastics has been losing the prestige that the discipline enjoyed only a few decades ago. This might be related to a general trend observable in linguistics, that tends to accord lesser significance to etymological approaches, but it might also be the consequence of a lack of theoretical and methodological renewal that some linguists criticize. Levinson (2003: 69) observes for instance
that “[t]he study of placenames or onomastics is one of the older branches of linguistic enquiry […]. But despite the long tradition of study, little of theoretical interest has emerged”.

In this paper I intend to respond to Levinson’s criticism by proposing an alternative approach to the study of (place) names. While the historical perspective has prevailed for decades in onomastics, I propose to adopt a synchronic view, by studying place names as they are used in naturally occurring conversations. My approach is interactional in its foundation and draws on the investigative methods developed in conversation analysis and interactional linguistics. I will show in the following sections that this method allows not only for a contextualized analysis of actual (place) name usage, but also for a reconsideration of the category “place name” and hence for a re-examination of traditional onomastic concepts.

Before going into the analysis of the data, I shall reflect on the practices of data collection in historical onomastics and show how these shape subsequent analytic possibilities.

2. Data collection in onomastics

As a philological discipline, the onomastic approach is deeply rooted in a humanistic tradition preoccupied with conserving cultural heritage and characterized by an incontrovertible demand for exactitude and completeness. The latter aspects are particularly visible in the diversity of data on which historical onomasticians build their analyses. These encompass written documents, both ancient (notary records, tax lists, travel journals, etc.) and recent, records of onomastic interviews, as well as phonetic transcriptions of single place names. Given this heterogeneous set of data, onomasticians have to deal with an array of corpus-related problems: for instance, in ancient documents place names may be written in Latin, in “standard” or in vernacular languages (especially in areas of language contact; see Werlen 2008, 2010), they may be handwritten or printed and, of course, they may present orthographical variations.

The data stemming from spoken language is generally collected in an experimental setting. The researcher usually conducts interviews with informants either on the basis of cartographic material and/or name lists or while exploring on foot the location for which place names are to be collected. Although interviewing is a thoroughly interactional activity, it is common practice in onomastic fieldwork to isolate the place names from
the conversational environment of their emergence. This is particularly
evident in the still widespread practice consisting of direct on-the-spot pho-
netic transcription of the place name as uttered by the informant (without
previous audio recording). Indeed, audio recordings are generally seen as
unnecessary. In her paper on field methods in microtoponomastics Waser
(2004: 355) affirms for instance that “[t]he use of tape recorders can be
helpful at the beginning for subsequent verifications. In my experience,
with increasing practice the device does not provide any big advantage,
unless conversations are to be stored as sound documents”.5

Usually, data collected in this way are taken as a set of notes containing
one or more phonetic transcriptions of the “same” name. This is best illus-
trated with an example of a hand-written note, extracted from the rich cor-
pus preserved at the Research Center for Name Studies (Forschungsstelle
für Namenkunde) of the University of Berne. The data below (Figure 1)
was collected in 1962 by an investigator identified as “T.F.”, interviewing
the informant “Br.”:

Figure 1. Compiled data form used for place name collection in onomastic re-
search (Forschungsstelle für Namenkunde, Institut für Germanistik,
University of Berne).
This document accounts for the complexity of the data constituted by the toponomastics’ fieldwork, e.g. the ‘previous writing’ (*Bisherige Schreibung*) is rendered with two graphic representations, the phonetic transcription varies – also with respect to a hypothetical contextualized use of the toponym. Informants were indeed asked (and still are, according to Waser 2004: 358) how the specific name was pronounced as a response to the question *wohin?*, i.e. ‘where’ (are you going)?

This multiplication of data, which I have only been able to outline here, is often regarded with ambivalence by onomasticians. On the one hand, the rich investigative sources allow for a detailed description of formal variants and diachronic developments and possibly facilitate the etymologist’s task. On the other hand they appear problematic when it comes to what is generally seen as the final product of onomastic investigation, called the *Namenbuch* ‘name book’ in the German tradition. Such name books are organized very much like dictionaries (see Schneider and Blatter 2011 for a recent example), i.e. as a list of lemmatized place names. Hence, the persons who compile onomastic dictionaries have to agree on the formal characteristics of the names that will be retained as lemmata. This inevitably introduces a dimension of “officiality”, as those name forms that are recorded as dictionary entries are likely to be treated as the official ones. While onomastic dictionaries are indeed mostly organized with respect to the written name form, they usually also document the (local, regional, standard etc.) pronunciation(s) of the place names – again, the issue of selecting the “right” pronunciation for the specific purposes of the publication might be problematic. Moreover, compilers usually do not reproduce the phonetic transcription as it figures in the primary transcriptions, but a simplified version – introducing yet another transformation of the data. The reason for this is of course practical, as the authors are generally concerned about the legibility of the phonetic transcripts for the intended readership.

3. Studying place name usage in social interaction

Work on (place) names in social interaction has been carried out in different linguistic subdisciplines, at least since the 1970s. Based on Austin’s (1962) speech act theory and developments of it, Dobnig-Jülch (1977) came up with a pragmatic analysis of pet names, while Werner (1986, 1995) defined the field that he called *Pragmatik der Eigennamen* ‘pragmatics of proper names’. In these approaches, the techniques of data collection
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are rarely discussed – often, indeed, the data stem from introspection and have no empirical basis.

For a fundamentally empiricist approach that analyzes essentially “naturally occurring” data – i.e. not collected through experimental setups such as interviews etc. – we have to turn to conversation analysis and its extension as interactional linguistics. Being rooted in sociology – and in one of its most incisive developments, namely ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967) – conversation analysts are not primarily interested in language, but in the participants’ actions. Interaction is understood to be “the primordial site for sociality” (Schegloff 1987: 208) and talk is just one resource that can be employed to study the constitution of sociality. This praxeological view on language is patent, for instance, in Schegloff’s (1972) seminal paper on what he calls place formulations. Contrary to the way linguists would proceed, Schegloff does not analyze particular language units – say, place names – that speakers use to refer to geographic entities. Rather, his object of research is instead a practice, as he examines the linguistic resources that speakers employ when referring to a location. In his (1972) data, Schegloff observes five kinds of place formulations, i.e. ways in which speakers refer to places in interaction. These are: a) geographical formulations (addresses, degrees of latitude and longitude), b) relation-to-members formulations (Chuck’s house), c) relation-to-landmarks formulations (nearby the bridge), d) course-of-action places (where they put the rubbish) and e) place names. Hence, from this point of view, place names are but one possibility among a set of others for what Mondada (2009: 1994) calls spatial description.

But how do interactants choose among the different resources that are at their disposal for referring to space? How do they opt for the appropriate formulation? According to Schegloff, speakers analyze the interactions at hand with regard to three dimensions, that he captures under the headings a) location analysis (where are the speakers located with respect to each other and in relation to the place that is being described?), b) membership analysis (how are the speakers reciprocally categorized?) and c) topic or activity analysis (which topic is being discussed and/or what is the activity the participants are engaged in?).

As for the specific kinds of place formulations, Schegloff notes that place names are used unproblematically when the speaker can reasonably assume that the interlocutor knows the place bearing that name. It may be added that, reflexively, this is precisely the assumption that the speaker exhibits by employing a place name. Preferentially, however, speakers use relation-to-members formulation to refer to a place, as Schegloff notes. The conclusion of his paper is thus that interactants choose place formulations
that are right (or appropriate) for all practical purposes, without necessarily being correct (or precise) from a strictly referential point of view.

Apart from Schegloff’s seminal paper, practices of place reference have scarcely been examined from a conversation analytic perspective (but see Mondada 2000; Myers 2006; Heritage 2007). Even less attention has been ascribed to the use of place names in interaction and to the analysis of the social actions that participants accomplish when using place names. However, under the label interactional onomastics I recently proposed an approach to the study of names as grounded in conversation analytic methods and that aims at investigating names as resources for social action (De Stefani 2009a).

The specific “analytic mentality” (Schenkein 1978) attributed to conversation analysis can be discerned at the very early stages of investigation (i.e. during fieldwork and data collection) as well as in the subsequent analytical steps. The corpus generally consists of audio and/or video recordings of unelicited interaction. The interaction is naturally occurring, in that it is assumed that it would have taken place also in the absence of the researcher. Hence, the data may consist of diverse settings of interaction that are recurrently observable in a community – such as service encounters (3.1.), guided tours (3.2.) or even focus group discussions (3.3.). Unlike sociolinguistic or “traditional” onomastic interviews, the latter are not used as a technique for eliciting data (consisting of, for instance, isolated onymic items), but as a specific kind of interaction that is observable in our culture.

The analysis proper of interactional data aims at a contextualized description of the linguistic resources. Place names – as well as all the other language units – are embedded in turns-at-talk of a priori undetermined length and in the sequential development of the interaction. What precedes the occurrence of a place name (within the turn, but also within the sequence) and what follows it are crucial for the analysis. This is in line with the ethnomethodological reasoning according to which “[…] the activities whereby members produce and manage settings of organized everyday affairs are identical with members’ procedures for making those settings ‘account-able’” (Garfinkel 1967: 1). The observable methods are accountable for the participants but also for the analyst: his or her aim is thus to describe the interactants’ methods and the resources they employ from an emic perspective, i.e. from the participants’ point of view. In other words, the analyst avoids applying to the data etic analytical categories that display his or her view on the interactional undertakings but not necessarily that of the participants. The necessity of an emic description might be considered problematic with regard to the specific object that is the present focus of my analysis. Indeed, when talking about names and place names I employ
analytical categories that have been thoroughly discussed by language philosophers (e.g. Mill 1843; Frege 1892; Russell 1905; Kripke 1972) and by some linguists, but that are not necessarily relevant categories for the speakers in their everyday interactions. The challenge of the researcher in interactional onomastics is thus to come to terms with this circumstance. The analyses below suggest a possible way forward.

3.1. Place names in their conversational environment

Just like any other language unit used in interaction, (place) names are embedded in a complex environment: they occur as units of a turn-at-talk, they are anchored in the sequential organization of the interaction, and they are fitted to the praxeological environment at hand. Therefore, if a contextualized analysis of place names is sought, these different analytic layers should be considered. An illustration of how these different dimensions are intertwined is provided with the analysis of the first excerpt. It is the beginning of a service encounter taking place in a Neapolitan travel agency. Two ladies have just entered the agency. At the opening of this encounter only one of the customers (Rosa) speaks to the travel agent (Anna):

(1) 9212av1A11 (42:23–42:40)

Starting from an onomastician’s perspective, we may be interested in the specific pronunciations of the names occurring in this excerpt. Although our transcription conventions do not allow an accurate rendering of their phonetic properties, it is sufficiently precise to observe that names such as
Swan Tour or Marsa Alam are pronounced by Rosa with a final schwa (line 6). This may of course be explained with regard to Rosa’s native linguistic background, Italian (and very likely also Neapolitan). However, this does not allow us to conclude that Rosa’s pronunciation reflects the way in which Italian speakers generally produce names ending in a consonant. Rather, this observation makes us aware that different ways of pronouncing a name are naturally observable and that these differences may be linked to idiosyncratic traits, but also, more importantly, to the action that the participant achieves by shaping a name’s phonetics in specific ways. This is visible at line 8, where Rosa formulates the name of the resort as Ωka::kahrama:°::°. The name is presented as problematic: Rosa provides a first formulation (Ωkah::-, line 8) that starts with a schwa and ends in a considerable lengthening of the last vowel, and she then does a self-repair (Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks 1977) by interrupting the first formulation and producing a new version of the name (kahrama:°::°, line 8), which is again constructed with an important stretch of the last syllable and with a low-voiced ending. Note that the name is not completed. However, Rosa goes on lengthening the last syllable of the name until she gets a sign of recipiency: it is only when Anna produces an overlapping sì (‘yes’, line 9) that Rosa stops the formulation of the name.

While it might be argued that Rosa simply displays pronunciation difficulties or incomplete recalling of the name, I would strongly advocate an analysis that examines the task that Rosa accomplishes by producing the name in this specific way. The travel agent’s sì (‘yes’, line 9) occurring in overlap with the very end of Rosa’s name formulation shows the travel agent’s understanding of Rosa’s talk: Anna treats the particular format in which the name is produced as an invitation for displaying recipiency. Note that Anna formulates only a sì – that Rosa treats as a continuer (Schegloff 1982) – while she could have produced the complete name of the resort (Kahramana). Hence, she displays recipiency with regard to Rosa’s talk and recognition of the resort’s name. In other words, she treats Rosa’s formulation of kahrama:°::° as an understandable name and not – as she could have done – as an incomplete and thus repairable name. Moreover, the fact that Anna avoids other-repair of (place) names in this interactional setting may reflect a preferred technique that is linked to membership categorization: it appears in fact that travel agents generally do not repair (or correct) idiosyncratic, incomplete pronunciations of place names. This can be seen as a way of displaying that the ‘customer is always right’ (further excerpts are given in De Stefani and Ticca 2011).

Let me end this analysis by a short note on the position that the names occurring in the excerpt above occupy in the turn-so-far and in the conver-
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As far as the latter dimension is concerned, the fact that the place name is used in the opening sequence of a service encounter is significant: as De Stefani and Ticca (in press) have shown, in this kind of interactions place names are recurrently used by the clients to introduce the ‘reason for the visit’ and as such establish the main topic of the subsequent talk. As regards the place names’ positions within the turn that Rosa is proffering, note that they occur at so called transition relevance places (or TRPs; Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974); i.e. at positions in the turn in which transition from current-speaker to next-speaker could occur. In the excerpt, Anna is visibly orienting to these positions, as she produces continuers precisely as the place names formulated by her interlocutor come to an end (lines 6–9).

Participants use place names to accomplish a great diversity of actions: they may serve for topic introduction, as in the excerpt just analyzed; they may also be resources that interactants mobilize when delivering a spatial description, as in the following piece of data.

3.2. Place names in spatial descriptions

Within conversation analysis, an early interest developed in spatial descriptions or place formulations in Schegloff’s (1972) terminology (see Section 3). Place names are explicitly taken into consideration as possible resources for describing space, although, from an interactional perspective, they have been less widely analyzed than other ways of formulating place. Therefore, in this section I will focus on a collective activity in which spatial descriptions are expected to be frequent, namely touristic guided tours.

The following excerpt is taken from a guided tour taking place in Bellinzona, in the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland. The participants are standing on a hill next to a castle (called Castelgrande) and the guide (Valle) is giving historical information to the group of tourists.

(2) 9135vgA11 (15:16–15:53)

1 VALE ci(o)è questa collina esisteva già diecimila anni prima di
that is this hill existed already ten thousand years before
dieci\mila\ anni\ prima\ di
2 cristo\ la collina dove \ c'è adesso christ\ the\ hill\ where\ there\ is\ now
cristo\ la\ collina\ dove\ (0.4) c'è\ adesso
3 castelgrande\ `h quindi\ì primi abitanti \ di castelgrande\ so\ the\ first\ inhabitants\ er\ of
4 bellinzena\ (0.4) erano qui su questa \ di bellinzena\ were\ here\ on\ this
bellinzena\ (0.4) \ erano\ qui\ su\ questa\ (0.3) \ di
5 primi sono stati\ì romani\ che\ passando\ hanno\ detto ma tò primi\ sono\ stati\ì\ romani\ che\ passing\ have\ said\ well\ hey
5 prima\ sono\ stati\ì\ romani\ che\ passando\ hanno\ detto\ ma\ tò
6 che bel\ (0.9) abbiamo il \ libero\ passaggio\ nort\ e\ sudo\ how\ nice\ we\ have\ the\ free\ passage\ north\ and\ south
In this excerpt the tour guide provides two occurrences of spatial description: the first (lines 1–4) focuses on the location in which the group is currently gathered, the second (lines 7–10) describes the centrality of that position with regard to the surrounding topographic features. I will only briefly comment on the different formulations observable at lines 1–4, and explain in greater detail lines 7–10, where several place names occur.

The description of the place in which the group is located is put in a historical perspective: the tourists are standing on a hill (questa collina, ‘this hill’, line 1) and the guide explains that it already existed ten thousand years BC. She goes on describing that place as dove c’è adesso castelgrande (‘where now there is Castelgrande’, lines 2–3), which establishes the opposition ‘10.000 years BC’ vs. ‘now’. Interestingly, the different temporal layers that the guide evokes are merged in the subsequent formulations, as she states e.g. that ‘the first inhabitants of Bellinzona were on this rock’ (lines 4–5). Indeed, with Bellinzona she refers to the current administrative organization of the territory (which includes Castelgrande), but the place name is also used with regard to what she presents as the first inhabitants of the area, namely the Romans (line 5). This formulation could be described as a sheer anachronism if analyzed in a decontextualized way. If we consider the interactional environment of its occurrence, we see that it is in fact recipient designed (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974: 727), as it demonstrates the way in which the guide categorizes her interlocutors, namely as ‘tourists-visiting-Bellinzona’. Seen in this way, the guide’s explanation fits her practical purposes of the moment.

This brief analysis provides a glimpse of how (spatial) descriptions are fitted to the participants’ membership categorization (Schegloff’s 1972 membership analysis; see Section 3). The place formulations that the guide provides in lines 7–10 illustrate more clearly the reflexive relationship between social categorization and spatial descriptions. To fully understand the guide’s description, I provide a map (Figure 2) in which the toponyms that she uses are pinpointed.
In lines 7–10 the guide is illustrating her claim that the Roman settlers saw in Bellinzona a place that offered ‘free passage’ (libero passaggio, line 6) between the north and the south. She does so by describing an area that she delimits to the north with reference to three passes (il san bernardino, lucomagno, il san gottardo, lines 7–9), specifying that San Bernardino is on one side (da na parte, line 7) and the two other passes ‘on the other side’ (dall’altra:, line 8). As for the southern boundaries of the area, they are also delimited in two steps, namely as lago maggiore l’italia (‘Lake Maggiore Italy’, line 9) and as lugano chiasso e: l’italia di nuovo (‘Lugano Chiasso and again Italy’, lines 9–10).

Describing a geographical area can be treated as a practical problem of the guide, inasmuch as she has to choose among different possible place formulations, and thus also among a variety of landmarks. At least two observations are due. First, we can see how the guide chooses the landmarks with respect to the current road system, as each of the places mentioned are located along one of the major roads that cross in the city of Bellinzona. The description is thus visibly oriented to the topic that the guide is talking about, i.e. depicting Bellinzona as located at the centre of routes...
between the north and the south. Second, we observe that the guide chooses different kinds of landmarks for the northern and for the southern parts of the area described. The named passes selected for the northern part refer in fact to places that are located on the language boundary between the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland (where Bellinzona is located) and the German-speaking area. The southern delimitation of the area also establishes boundaries. As she says ‘Lake Maggiore Italy’ (line 9) and ‘Lugano Chiasso and again Italy’ (lines 9–10) she first names topographic entities that are located in Switzerland (part of Lake Maggiore, and the cities of Lugano and Chiasso) and then mentions Italy. In other words, she uses the country name ‘Italy’ for the area that lies beyond the Swiss border – while she could have used other toponyms, e.g. names of well known Italian cities (Como, Milan), of the region (Lombardy), or even the name of the city of Rome, with respect to the historical gist of her explanation. The place formulations that the guide uses in this section of her talk manifestly display the way in which she categorizes her interlocutors – not only as tourists visiting Bellinzona, but also as people who are living in the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland. From this point of view, choosing the appropriate spatial description also allows the guide to construct a collective social identity.

3.3. Beyond place names

In the last section of this paper I would like to turn towards names that present both toponymic and anthroponymic usages. In the following excerpt I will give some thought to names that may be described as ‘family bynames’, whereby onomastics intend names that are assigned to persons who are tied to each other through kinship relations (Angelini 1997; Caprini 2001: 71). Such family names have been described as frequent in rural and alpine communities (De Stefani 2005; Favre 2005).

The excerpt below is taken from a focus group discussion that took place in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. The researcher (Sandro) is discussing family bynames with three Italian couples that have been living in Switzerland for many years. At least one member of each couple spent his or her adolescence in one of the two neighboring villages of Preone and Socchieve, situated in the pre-alpine region of Friuli (northeastern Italy). The conversation proceeds in Friulian and in Italian, and code-mixing is recurrent. The interaction was initially configured as an open, relaxed interview. However, the data so collected has not been used as a source from which to “extract” the names that the participants use during
their conversation (which is probably what would be expected from an orthodox onomastician’s point of view). Rather, the names are analyzed as resources used in the specific interaction in which the participants are engaged.

(3) fam51231A (37:26–37:35)

1 PIER chei di baraca a son: l:i di fonso quella- quella ‘h
   those di baraca are there di fonso those those
2 case che sono la[ghi[ù vicino a v[o:i\} ]
   houses that are down there next to you
3 RUGG [ da[vanti lì da[vanti l^ga]ra[ge °lì°
   in front there in front of the garage there
4 SAND [mhm [hm
5 PIER [chei lì a son
   those are
6 chei di baraca\
   those di baraca
7 SAND mhm

From a strictly onomastic point of view, Pieras’s (PIER) turn in line 1 already presents a problem. In fact, Piera is saying that the (persons) identified as *chei di baraca* are (meaning ‘reside’) in a place called *l:i di fonso*. It appears that the former of these two names is used to refer to people. This could, therefore, be categorized as an anthroponym. However, it is constructed with an onymic unit (De Stefani 2009b) for which it seems plausible to assume a toponymic reference (Friulian *baraca*, Italian *baracca*, ‘shack’). In contrast, by saying *l:i di fonso* Piera refers to a place – and therefore the construction can be described as a toponym – but uses an onymic unit that has an anthroponymic basis (*fonso* being an abbreviated form of the personal name *Alfonso*). Although the change of onymic categories has been well documented from a historical perspective, the data provided here gives us a glimpse of how such alterations occur in the course of the conversation. As De Stefani and Pepin (2006) have shown, the participants interacting here (and generally speakers from the pre-alpine Friulian area) have specific linguistic resources that allow them to display whether an onymic unit is to be understood as an anthroponym, a toponym or in yet a different way. In fact, they recurrently use the format *chei di* (‘those from’) + onymic unit to refer to persons, while the format *lì di* (‘there at’) + onymic unit is mobilized with reference to places. Combinations are thus possible – e.g. *chei di Fonso* meaning ‘those (who live) at Fonso’s’, *chei lì di Fonso*, etc. This illustrates that the static boundaries that onomasticians usually draw between anthroponymy and toponymy appear much more permeable in authentic conversational use.
This short piece of data allows me also to illustrate the occurrence of other kinds of spatial descriptions. After having mentioned the two names discussed above, Piera provides a place formulation. By saying *quelle 'h case che sono laggii vicino a vo:i* ‘those houses that are down there next to you’ (lines 1–2) she actually produces what Schegloff (1972) called a *relation-to-members formulation*. In other words, she refers to co-present persons to describe where the area called *l:i di fonso* is located, namely next to where some other co-present participant used to live. This illustrates also Schegloff’s (1972) observation according to which relation-to-members formulations are used preferentially. Note that the following description, uttered by Ruggero (RUGG) is designed as a *relation-to-landmarks formulation* in Schegloff’s terminology: *davanti l^garage °li° *‘in front there in front of the garage there’ (line 3). In overlap with both of these descriptions Sandro (SAND) produces tokens of recipiency (*mhm*, *hm*, line 5), after which Piera mentions again the family by-name *chei di baraca* (lines 5–6) and thereby closes the discussion about this name.

A final consideration may be put forward with respect to the specific interactional setting documented in this data. We may wonder, indeed, how the different place formulations produced are related to the interaction at hand and, how they make visible the participants’ relevant membership categories. Firstly, we note that Piera and Ruggero present their turns as being oriented to and designed for Sandro. In fact, the spatial descriptions analyzed above come to an end as soon as Sandro exhibits recipiency. In other words, Piero and Ruggero treat him visibly as the recipient of their answers, i.e. as an ‘interviewee’, ‘assessor’, etc. Secondly, Ruggero’s decision to introduce an alternative place formulation in line 3 appears also to exhibit a relevant membership category. In fact, being capable of delivering an additional spatial description makes him recognizable as a competent member of the community that the participants are talking about, just as Piera. Thus, if it is true that “the capacity of calling things by their names is a sign of social competence” (Auer 1983: 184), then we may also support the idea that social competence is also displayed by the ability to attribute an array of possible descriptions to names.
4. Conclusions and perspectives

The aim of this paper has been to compare fieldwork methods in historical toponomastics and in interactional onomastics, as I call the study of name usage in naturally occurring interaction. Important differences have been noted with regard to data collection and treatment. We have seen that toponomasticians aim at gathering a maximal array of place names that are perceived as “existing” and “having existed” before and beyond the researcher’s fieldwork. Being rooted in the philological research tradition, this method is concerned with the thorough documentation of attested toponyms. The methods that have developed are thus suited to the specific scopes of this kind of research. However, it is notable that data collection procedures have remained practically unchanged over the decades – irrespective of the recent methodological developments in qualitative linguistic approaches. In presenting an interactionally-oriented approach, I have aimed to illustrate a field method that allows for a contextualized and praxeological analysis of place names. Fieldwork methods are patently shaped by the researchers’ analytical interests and by the actual analysis the data will be subjected to. Seen in this way, data are not just ‘collected’ – as if they had an independent existence in the field – they are rather constructed by the researcher with regard to his or her specific scientific needs and research questions.

Toponomastics and interactional onomastics visibly pursue different objects of research: the former is interested in specific units of language (place names), the latter in particular practices, such as referring to a location. This praxeological rationale requires that the analyst take into consideration a range of linguistic (and possibly other) resources that participants employ when referring to space, that may or may not mobilize toponyms. This way of proceeding seems sensible also with respect to onomastic research questions. Indeed, most onomasticians agree on the fact that (place) names are coined from so-called appellatives, i.e. non-onymic referential expressions. But while onomasticians have developed powerful methods that allow them to trace a place name back to earlier appellative descriptions (which at this point gain analytical interest), they have developed little interest in non-onymic formulations that are used in present-day language. It is my belief that it might be of interest to document recurrent appellative descriptions of places as currently used in natural conversation, as they might represent a first step towards becoming names and thus be a starting point of a process of onymization. Put differently, onomasticians have to
cope with the following problem: if the object of analysis is ‘proper’
names, then the researcher has to decide at what moment a documented
place formulation can be said to comprise a sufficient level of properhood
(Coates 2006) to be considered for analysis.

The above considerations show that the category of place name – just as
many other analytical categories employed in onomastic research – refers
to a porous, malleable object of research. It can be defined for the researcher’s practical purposes – but these rarely match the purposes for which
social actors use place names in their interactions. Place names are but one
possible resource available to participants for referring to space. Future
research in interactional onomastics should therefore explain how participants orient towards a specific treatment of place names (with respect to
appellative formulations). This would provide an emic, participant-centered
account for the description of what onomasticians, linguists and language
philosophers call a name. A further research desideratum relates to the sys-
tematic analysis of the sequential and praxeological environments in which
place names occur.

**Transcription conventions**

\/
\^{1.5}\text{rising or falling intonation of the preceding segment}
\text{rising or falling intonation of the following segment (dotted underline)}
\text{timed pause in seconds and tenths of seconds}

[]
\text{beginning and end of overlap}
\
\text{latching}
\text{inaudible segment}
\text{dubious hearing}

((cough))\text{transcriber’s comments}

\text{video stress}

\text{EXtra high volume}

\text{domani middle-high volume}

°\text{opera° low volume}

><\text{fast talk}

:\text{stretching of prior syllable}

par-\text{cut-off}

\^\text{liaison}

'h\text{inbreath}

'h'\text{outbreath}

\text{glottal closure}

ca^{\text{hh}}sa^{\text{hh}}\text{pronounced laughing}
Notes

* The interactional approach to the study of toponyms and spatial descriptions presented in this contribution is central to a project currently underway at the University of Berne. This project, entitled “The constitution of space in interaction: a conversation analytic approach to the study of place names and spatial descriptions” is directed by the author of this paper and currently benefits from the contribution of two other members, Anne-Danièle Gazin and Anna Claudia Ticca. A former member, Roberta Iacoletti, made an essential contribution to collecting and transcribing the data. I thank the Swiss National Science Foundation for generous support for the period 2008-2012 (project number PP001-119138). I also wish to thank Guy Puzey for revising my English in this paper.

1. Even Ferdinand de Saussure, who excluded proper names from his investigations on the linguistic sign, conducted etymological analyses of some place names in the French-speaking part of Switzerland (see de Saussure 1922: 604–607).

2. Egli’s work also reflects the evolutionistic climate of his time: in fact he concludes that the “lower” the cultural degree (Kulturstufe) of a community, the more descriptive are its place names, which are thus based on common names (such as lake, mount etc.). “Higher” cultures have, according to Egli, far more complex, semantically opaque place names (see Egli 1872: 18).

3. Linguistic geography represents a further interface between philology and geography. The first linguistic atlases were published in the last decades of the 19th century: in 1881 Jules Gilliéron issued the Petit atlas phonétique du Valais roman, while in 1889 Georg Wenker published the first map of the Deutscher Sprachatlas. The most influential oeuvre of linguistic geography, Jules Gilliéron’s and Edmond Edmont’s Atlas linguistique de la France, was printed between 1902 and 1910.

4. An example from current Swiss toponomastic research on microtoponyms illustrates the demand for completeness. Waser (2004: 354) states that toponyms should be documented ‘without gaps’ (“das Namengut [soll] lückenlos erhoben und bearbeitet werden”) and posits an obligation (“Anspruch”), to collect all the names, present and past, given to a topographic area.


6. In the German-speaking part of Switzerland fervent debates over the official forms of microtoponyms surface periodically and are generally about whether a more “dialectal” or a more “standard” orthography should be adopted. This dispute has been going on for more than a century and was already documented by Egli (1886: 360).
7. Among the different kinds of place formulations that Schegloff (1972) describes, the reader might miss what we could call deictic formulations (e.g. here, there) as one further resource participants use for spatial reference.

8. The concepts of place and space have been theorized mainly among geographers. Tuan (1977: 54) described place as a corollary of human presence: “enclosed and humanized space is place. Compared to space, place is a center of established values”. For a constructivist understanding of place, see also Lefebvre (1974) and Casey (1997). For the purposes of this paper, I will use space and place indistinctively.

9. On the role of the video camera and of co-present researchers in the documented setting and on techniques for obtaining naturalistic data see Heath, Hindmarsh, and Luff (2010).

10. While the distinction between emic (i.e. ‘internal, endogenous’) and etic (‘external, exogenous’) gained particular currency in anthropology (see Dundes 1962; Harris 1964), the terms themselves were coined by the linguist Kenneth Pike (Pike 1954).

11. A further observation that corroborates this analysis is related to the language choice that Piera and Ruggero operate in this excerpt. The inspection of the whole corpus from which this excerpt is taken proves that Piera and Ruggero tend overwhelmingly to speak Friulian when addressing each other, while they use Italian when talking to Sandro – who is thereby categorized as a non-speaker (or non-fluent speaker) of Friulian.


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