

## DIACHRONIC MEANING AND CULTURAL LITERACY IN ESP: INSIGHTS FROM ENGLISH PLACE-NAME MORPHOLOGY

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### Abstract

*Meaning in language is the sum total of different components whose meanings interact on a certain linguistic level. A diachronic reading of the constitutive morphemes of a word offers a discrete dimension of analysis and can enhance cultural literacy in an ESP context. This study aims at demonstrating the importance of paying due attention to the linguistic, cultural, and historical elements in place names. A morphological analysis of a sample of place names is conducted from a diachronic perspective. The findings reveal historical and cultural nuances whose incorporation in ESP classes is pedagogically sound and convenient.*

**Keywords:** diachronic meaning, cultural literacy, ESP, English place-name morphology

**JEL:** Y90, Z13

### Introduction

Meaning is an indispensable component of language. There is no language without meaning. This makes meaning particularly important and worth studying from the perspectives of both theoretical and applied linguistics, including English for Specific Purposes (henceforth ESP).

In ESP, the overarching goal is the acquisition of knowledge on the part of the learner in a given field through English as the language of instruction. Apart from the meaning and translation equivalents of specialised vocabulary, which constitutes a core component of ESP courses, teaching ESP benefits from the inclusion of culture-specific items to enhance cultural literacy and encourage a better understanding of the field in question in a broader historical and cultural context.

When it comes to ESP courses in the fields of economics and socio-political studies, English place names are a case in point. Viewed diachronically, they carry rich history, cultural heritage, and layered meanings. Such valuable information is usually not readily available. Rather, it has been masked by sound changes,

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merging of words, and speakers' interpretations. A morphological analysis from a diachronic point of view can uncover intriguing details which can help learners form a better idea of the historical and cultural significance of place names, as well as interpret and construct meaning relevant to the field of inquiry.

Place names have been addressed extensively in the literature. The purpose of this paper is to adapt what the literature has established to an ESP context, the fields of economics and socio-political studies in particular. A diachronic morphological analysis of a sample of place names is proposed. When found necessary, this is accompanied by additional information about the constitutive morphemes. Then, the relevance of the analysis for teaching ESP is discussed.

This study is illustrative and focuses on selected place-name types. It aims to demonstrate pedagogical applicability rather than provide a full onomastic account. The examples presented are confined to towns and cities because such names are in general more popular and recognisable by ESP students. Also, place-name types are selected in such a way that they are representative of important historical events or periods from the history of the English people.

Another necessary limitation of the scope of the study is the depth of the analysis. The analysis is adapted for the purposes of an ESP seminar and does not provide a detailed linguistic description of the place names under discussion as the target audience are not students of linguistics. Particular attention is paid to the second or last morphological component as it usually carries information about the origin and original function of the name.

### **Place names, meaning, and diachrony: a brief overview**

Meaning as a multifaceted phenomenon spreads beyond the reach of synchronic lexical semantics. Meaning evolves over time as do other components of language. This aspect of meaning is studied by historical linguistics, in particular historical semantics. As meaning changes, some elements of it become blurred and difficult to recognise from a purely synchronic reading. Such semantic opacity is unavoidable but its deciphering often supplies important details and nuances with respect to the significance of a concept, area, name, etc. Clearly, meaning has a temporal dimension relevant to the interpretation of history-related elements and culture-specific items.

As anything and everything in language, place names are subject to inevitable language change in all shapes and forms and at all linguistic levels. Unlike any content word, place names are typically carriers of historical and cultural information irrespective of whether the latter is semantically transparent or opaque.

Such historical and cultural information enhances learners' cultural literacy, a concept introduced by Eric Donald Hirsch Jr. (1987), a literary critic and professor of English. Cultural literacy is the idea that comprehension requires broad shared knowledge, which is exactly what the analysis of the sample below aims to provide. For Hirsch, cultural literacy is about common references that make communication efficient. Thus, he advocates the idea that in order for a text to be understood, the reader should know the context behind it. Also, without shared knowledge, communication is not efficient and breaks down.

Insofar as ESP is concerned, Hirsch's cultural literacy is definitely a useful concept, and place names can serve as a good source of broadening students' horizons and expanding the scope of shared knowledge. Due to the nature of place names and ESP courses, research connecting the two is limited and the relationship should be inferred from adjacent fields although studies in toponymy suggest that place names can function as specialised lexical and cultural units. One of the very few articles that tangentially relates place names to ESP is Kruk (2016) where a few activities are presented for ESP students of geography at tertiary level. This illustrates in turn that place names can be a useful supplementary ingredient in ESP for economics and socio-political studies but also in ESP for geography, tourism, business, etc.

Key studies on English place names include Gelling (1997) and Gelling and Cole (2000). The role of onomastics in historical linguistics is discussed by Hough (2009) in a paper of the same name. There are separate chapters on onomastics in three of the volumes of *The Cambridge History of the English Language* series: Clark (1992/2005), Clark (1992/2006), and Coates (1998/2007). These chapters cover the development of place names in different periods of the history of the English language.

### **Data and methodology**

For the illustrative purposes of this paper, the data analysed consist of a selected sample of English place names whose morphological structure relates to important periods in the historical development of the British Isles. Such periods include, but are not limited to, the Roman legacy, the Anglo-Saxon settlement, the Viking influence, etc. Only place names of towns and cities are analysed below in order to make the paper more accessible to broad readership.

The methodological approach combines diachronic morphological analysis with qualitative cultural interpretation. Particular attention is paid to the suffixes as they tend to indicate origin, specialisation, and function of the place name. In some cases, the analysis is extended to mention cognates of the suffixes in other Germanic languages and, if applicable, in Bulgarian.

Also, the evolution of the meaning of the suffixes and the whole names is traced with reference to its contribution to the description and perception of geographical features and cultural significance. Where necessary, this is complemented by brief contextual information to clarify historically motivated meanings that are no longer transparent to contemporary speakers. The aim of the analysis is not to provide a comprehensive onomastic description but identify meaning-bearing elements that can be of pedagogical relevance in an ESP context.

### **Diachronic analysis of selected English place names**

For the purposes of this paper, the selected place names are grouped into four broad categories reflecting historically significant layers in the development of the British Isles: administrative and urban meaning, Roman and ecclesiastical legacy, Anglo-Saxon settlement and economic organisation, and Viking influence. This classification does not claim exhaustiveness but aims to illustrate how diachronic morphological elements encode culturally and historically meaningful information that remains embedded in contemporary geographical nomenclature.

Administrative and urban meaning is signalled by the suffixes *-borough* and *-bury*. Historically, these suffixes are two forms of the same word, with *-bury* deriving from the dative form of Old English *burg/burh* which means a fortified place or stronghold. Place names such as *Peterborough* and *Canterbury* show the idea of a protected or important settlement which was also an administrative centre. There is an interesting tendency regarding the distribution of the two suffixes: *-bury* is rare in the North-East of England, but in the rest of the country it is much more common than *-borough*.

The Scandinavian cognates *-berg*, *-bjerg*, and *-borg* are typically associated with elevated terrain or fortified constructions, often forming part of castle names (Fridell, 2002; Wahlberg 2005). In these languages, the semantic field has in many cases narrowed or specialised. Not all Germanic languages, however, employ cognates of *-borough/-bury* productively in place names. Frisian, for example, shows a different pattern (Versloot, 2011), which underscores the language-specific trajectories of similar inherited forms. For Bulgarian learners, it may be of interest that a hypothetical Old Church Slavonic or Old Bulgarian cognate can be related to *bregu*, (see [www.etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com)) preserved in Present-Day Bulgarian *бряг* ('shore', 'bank'), illustrating deeper Indo-European connections and long-term semantic shifts.

Roman and ecclesiastical legacy is revealed by *-chester*, *-cester*, *-caster*, and *-minster*, the first three being different forms of one and the same word. The suffix marks locations that developed around Roman camps and later became urban centres. *-Minster* derives from Old English *mynster* which in turn derives from Latin *monasterium*. Examples include Manchester, Leicester, Doncaster.

The suffixes *-ton* and *-ham* show Anglo-Saxon settlement and economic organisation. The suffix *-ton* derives from Old English *tun* which is Modern English town. The letter ‘u’ in *tun* was replaced by ‘o’ in *-ton* for the sake of visual clarity. The original meaning of the suffix is an enclosed settlement or farmstead. Place names such as *Brighton*, *Luton*, *Northampton* fall into this category.

Similarly, *-ham* derives from Old English *hām*, meaning ‘home’ or ‘homestead’. Found in names such as *Nottingham* and *Birmingham*, it denotes habitation and stable settlement. The element may be compared to German *Heim* and possibly to Swedish *-holm*, although the latter also involves the meaning ‘islet’ or ‘small island’. Such comparisons illustrate broader Germanic patterns of naming practices while highlighting language-specific semantic developments.

The suffix *-by* reflects Scandinavian settlement and its meaning is ‘farmstead’ or ‘village’. Place names such as *Grimsby* and *Derby* indicate areas of Norse influence, particularly in the Danelaw region. In Modern Danish, *by* means ‘town’, illustrating a semantic expansion comparable to that observed in English *town*. The preservation of *-by* in English place names thus marks both historical contact and subsequent integration, serving as a linguistic reminder of cross-cultural interaction and demographic change.

### **Pedagogical implications for ESP teaching**

The diachronic morphological analysis of English place names has direct pedagogical relevance in ESP contexts, particularly in courses taught to students of economics and socio-political studies. While place names are often treated as fixed labels requiring memorisation, their internal structure provides valuable insights into institutional development, settlement patterns, and economic organisation.

Morphological awareness contributes to vocabulary depth, thereby enhancing lexical competence. In ESP settings, this depth of processing enhances understanding and facilitates the decoding of specialised terminology. The analytical skills developed through the decomposition of place names can be extended beyond proper names to domain-specific vocabulary, where recognising morphological components often clarifies conceptual meaning and improves precision in usage.

Alternatively, the decomposition of place names can be done after other related morphology-based exercises such as word formation. In ESP seminars at UNWE, a lot of time is devoted to word formation exercises, particularly derivation, which aim at both enriching students’ vocabulary and helping students build new associations between words that they already know. For example, such word formation exercises help students associate the verb *punish* with the noun *impunity*. As can be seen, the relation between the two words is not as transparent as

it is between, say, *develop* and *development* where the suffix is attached without any changes in the pronunciation of the base of the word.

The idea of a not fully transparent relation between two words or the components of a word can be applied when analysing place names in ESP classes for demonstrative purposes. For example, it is enough to mention that the suffix *-ton* in *Brighton* means *town* and it refers historically to Anglo-Saxon settlement. The relation is not fully transparent in the sense that one can hardly associate *-ton* with *town* without having some historical background. No further details are necessary such as explaining to students that originally the name used to be Beorhthelm's tun: the town of Beorhthelm and that we do not know who Beorhthelm was, perhaps someone who had a bright helmet (*beorht helm*). Later, the name was written as Bristelmestune (Mybrightonandhove.Org, 2012).

Why is all this relevant? It helps ESP students get used to certain associations and allusions. This can, in turn, be useful when students work with authentic texts such as articles from *The Economist* where they can find a lot of historical references not necessarily confined to place names. For example, there is an article entitled 'A tale of two economists' from 28 September 2000 (*The Economist*, 2000) clearly alluding to Dickens' (1859) *A Tale of Two Cities*, and so forth.

Also, diachronic place-name analysis fosters interpretative competence. By tracing how linguistic forms preserve traces of Roman administration, Anglo-Saxon settlement, or Scandinavian influence, learners are encouraged to situate contemporary economic and socio-political discourse within a broader historical continuum. This perspective supports critical engagement with texts and promotes interdisciplinary awareness.

Finally, the proposed approach does not require additional curriculum restructuring. Brief, well-integrated etymological remarks can be incorporated into existing teaching materials, enriching classroom discussion without displacing core content. In this way, linguistic analysis functions as an added interpretative layer rather than an additional curricular burden. This is not a central gap in ESP pedagogy. Rather, the approach presented above builds upon well established pedagogical practices such as English word formation and expands students' cultural literacy.

## Conclusion

The paper demonstrates that diachronic morphological reading can be viewed as a meaningful contribution to cultural literacy within an ESP framework. By analysing selected English place names through their historical and morphological components, the study illustrates how linguistic forms preserve traces of institutional development, settlement patterns, and socio-economic organisation.

Such analysis reveals that proper names are not merely referential labels but carriers of layered historical meaning.

The findings suggest that incorporating diachronic insights into ESP instruction enhances not only lexical competence but also interpretative awareness. Morphological decomposition encourages learners to construct meaning actively and to situate contemporary economic and socio-political discourse within a broader historical continuum. In this sense, diachronic meaning construction becomes both a linguistic and a pedagogical tool.

Although the study is illustrative in scope, it demonstrates that even selective integration of place-name analysis can enrich ESP teaching without disrupting curricular priorities. The approach thus offers a feasible and academically grounded way to combine linguistic analysis with domain-specific learning objectives.

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