

## Popular toponomastics pathways in Sicily: contacts between categories and new connotations

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DOI: 10.2436/15.8040.01.106

### Abstract

This study is a reflection on the category of popular toponym and on the pathways which they are subjected to. It operates in two directions: the first one is that of onomaturgy, the second one takes into account overextensions, secondary connotations and people's consciousness of places. The first issue moves from the reflections resulted from the collection of ethnic nicknames (or *blasons populaires*) in Sicily. In particular, we start from the observation according to which popular anthroponyms can contribute to generate in speakers popular toponyms that follow a pathway of overlapping/substitution like the one concerning ethnics and *blasons populaires*. The second issue regards official toponyms related to locations that have been charged with connotations in popular consciousness, becoming symbols or passing from proper nouns to common nouns on the basis of true or presumed peculiarities. It is the case of "Carrapipi" (today "Valguarnera Caropepe" in province of Enna), that indicates any place whose localization is difficult to identify, or that of Milocca (today "Milena" in province of Caltanissetta), which has become any remote place par excellence

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«Though toponomastic is one of the most engaging and hardest fields in glottology, amateurs particularly enjoy toponomastic researches; by doing so, they increase confusion; but they are just as children walking on the eaves, unaware of the danger they are encountering» (Tagliavini in Marcato, 2002, 106).

What Tagliavini here states, represents a steady *caveat* for anybody who wishes to start toponomastic researches. In this paper, I will take these words into account and I will be much engaged in pointing out trends and dynamics around some toponomastic elements, rather than trying to decode old or new ones. Moreover I will pretend neither exhaustiveness nor disciplinary orthodoxy.

This work originates from a newly-born experiment regarding popular anthroponomy. I refer to the DASES project,<sup>1</sup> started in 2010, which aims at gathering as many *blasons populaires* in Sicily, and underlines the renewed interest of Palermo research group for the topics related to popular onomastic forms.<sup>2</sup>

In the first phases of this experience, numerous toponomastic occurrences have been found.

The research for the *blasons populaires* is, in fact, tightly connected with the toponyms which constitute their reference ambits, «considering that the *blason populaire* concerns any regular mark referred “to the inhabitants of...”» (Castiglione/Burgio, 2011, 21).

<sup>1</sup> The first project lines of the DASES *Dizionario-Atlante dei Soprannomi Etnici in Sicilia* (Atlas-Dictionary of the *blasons populaires* in Sicily) and coordinated by Marina Castiglione and Michele Burgio, are in Castiglione/Burgio 2011, Castiglione/Burgio 2013 a and Castiglione/Burgio 2013 b.

<sup>2</sup> Such a research itinerary parallels, in a way, what, with special reference to the individual and familiar nicknames Giovanni Ruffino has been carrying out for many years within the Linguistic Atlas of Sicily (*Atlante Linguistico della Sicilia –ALS–*) and which led to two important publications (Ruffino 2009 and Ruffino *in press*). As far as the Sicilian toponomastics and microtoponomastics is concerned, the project of «gathering, within the inquiries for the *Linguistic Atlas of Sicily*, the toponyms in their dialect form» (Ruffino, 1995, 134), is only at the beginning. An overall study of the toponomastic forms through field work requires, in fact, time and economic resources.

Whenever, though, according to the project, we deal with «the *microblasons* generating among the quarters, neighbourhoods, or even smaller town areas» (*ibid.*), we will have to do with microtoponyms which contain the *microblasons*.

They are almost generally urban microtoponyms which ought to be integrated with extra-urban forms after placing the «microtoponym within an exhaustive system of diachronic, diatopic and cultural variants through the use not only of written edited and non edited fonts, but also of fonts belonging to the oral tradition which constitutes the dialect tradition» (Ruffino, 1995, 135).

There is evidence that the anthroponimic forms of popular origin and use can't be dealt with making use of just linguistic tools (even though these are essential when gathering and arranging the whole material), but, especially during the interpreting phase, it is important to use various disciplinary approaches involving sociology, anthropology and history.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, along with the etymological and motivation research, it appeared necessary to consider all changes occurring to the words during the years or even while the name was being studied through the speakers' attitudes: the new uses in new contexts and new nuances in connotations which, in the meantime, had been taking place giving new meanings.

As a result, we might have, on the one hand, new toponimic and para-toponimic data (cf. §2), not necessarily already historically settled (and we will have to take account of this aspect) because originating from the continuous process of urban rearrangement; on the other hand, thanks to the socio-onomastic perspective, it will be possible, during the gathering phase, to plan an inquiry methodology capable not only to get to the lexical datum, but also to the socio-cultural connotations which, very often, are given by the speakers; such a perspective can be realized only through the field work.

## 1. Popular toponomastics between linguistic curiosity and new connotations

### 1.1. Toponymic appellatives

The inquiries have so far shown some new formations which, referring to the toponyms, mingle with them, becoming something similar to what we might call “nicknames of toponyms” and which one refers to, whenever, as a joke, he/she wants to hint at that place.<sup>4</sup>

Once taken note of the terminologic peculiarity of the nickname reference which, in these lexical forms,<sup>5</sup> is not fully respected, we prefer calling them “toponymic appellatives”.

Here a table follows with those toponimical appellatives which, during the inquiry, seemed to be quite vital

<sup>3</sup> It is worth here remembering the strong invitation to the cooperation among more disciplines by those scholars dealing with toponomastics, such as Aversano, 2007, 45 who states: «It is not convenient for anybody to study the **toponyms isolating them and isolating himself** (bold characters by the author, editor's note) but, in my view, it is necessary, the cooperation at least among a linguist, a geographer and a historian». In this case, we will have to do without the geographer and the historian (but also the sociologist and the anthropologist) or, even with the limits of the dialectological approach, try to enrich the observations with different sensitiveness considering that it «would be methodologically quite risky to study the toponym in itself and from a unique approach without establishing a connection with the other information got from all possible different sources» (*ibid.*).

<sup>4</sup> This phenomenon is recorded all over the world. There are town appellatives: the most famous ones dating back to 1800c and 1900 are: Paris à Ville Lumiere; New York City à The Big Apple; Las Vegas à Sin City. But there are even much more which are interwoven: Riga is Baltic Paris and Dresda is Elba Florence; Roma is the “Eternal City” but Moscow is the “Third Rome”; Venice is the “Serenissima” but Bangkok is Venice of the East. Numerous “the town of...” have to be added to these: in Italy, for example, Sanremo is very famous as → the town of the flowers. In Sicily, there are various examples, such as Resuttano (CL) → *u paisi dû suli*, ‘the town of the sun’ and, despairingly, Caltagirone (CT) → *u paisi dî càntari* ‘the town of chamber pots’.

<sup>5</sup> And this for at least two reasons: 1) they belong to a small part of toponyms; 2) quite rarely they crystallize so becoming folk heritage recognized by the majority of the speakers.

| Official toponym        | Dialect toponym                | Toponymic appellative                                      | Vitality |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------|--|----------|
| Caltanissetta           | <i>Cartanisetta</i>            | <i>Maonza</i>  | ↑        |
| Agrigento               | <i>Girgenti</i>                | <i>Springfield</i>   | ↓        |
| Menfi                   | <i>Mènfici</i>                 | <i>piccola Parigi</i> <sup>6</sup> ( <i>little Paris</i> ) | →        |
| Campofelice di Roccella | <i>'u Casali'</i> <sup>7</sup> | <i>Dallas</i> <sup>8</sup>                                 | ↑        |
| Partinico               | <i>Partinicu</i>               | <i>Palermu nicu</i> <sup>9</sup> ( <i>little Palermo</i> ) | →        |
| Augusta                 | <i>Austa</i>                   | <i>Augusterdam</i>   | →        |

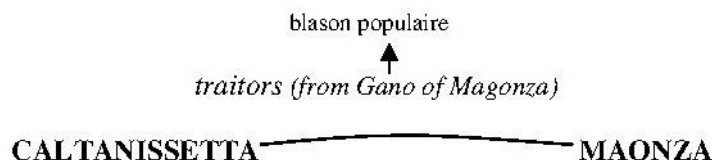
**Table 1.** Some official, dialectal toponyms and appellatives in Sicily

These forms can't properly be numbered among the *blasons populaires*, but they are nevertheless records of linguistic creativity which are not to be neglected. Some of them recur quite often and show a good vitality.

In these five cases the toponymical appellative is contained within the category of the toponym, relating so to a bigger and sure reference point. However, the itineraries which lead to the appellatives are quite different, various and never predictable.

Here we will focus on three of them: from the one which shows a clear and neat pathway, to the one whose origin the informants seem to show major hesitations and perplexities on.

In the first case (see diagram 1) it has been possible to reconstruct all the phases leading to the toponymic appellative; and this through a diachronic study dating back its probable origin to a precise historical period.<sup>10</sup>



**Diagram 1.** From Caltanissetta to *Maonza*.

It is quite peculiar to note here as the pathway which connects the German town of Mainz with the Sicilian town of Caltanissetta is “epic”, in as much as it is drawn from a character of the “Puppets Theatre”, not existing any other connections with transalpine Mainz (see diagram 2): in other words, the toponym of “Magonza” has shifted to the deonomastics *maunzisi*; as a consequence of it, the town of *maunzisi* (traitors) has, par excellence, fully become a new Magonza (with the fall of the paragogig -g-).

<sup>6</sup> The appellative of “little Paris”, in Sicily, is also given to Riesi (CL) and Paceco (TP) and, in Italy, to Turin. We also mention Bucarest, Lipsia and Dalat in Vietnam

<sup>7</sup> Among the dialect toponyms, lots of “*Casali*” occur. Trovato, 2008, 260 records Nicosia and San Teodoro.

<sup>8</sup> This appellative, in Sicily, is also given to Vallelunga Pratameno (Caltanissetta). In the Palermitan under world slang Dallas refers to the quarter of Bonagia. For further examination on Campofelice di Roccella / Dallas, see Castiglione/Burgio 2013 a.

<sup>9</sup> Also Mazzarino (CL) is called the “*little Palermo*”.

<sup>10</sup> For the reconstruction of the historical event, cf. Burgio, 2009b, 152-3.

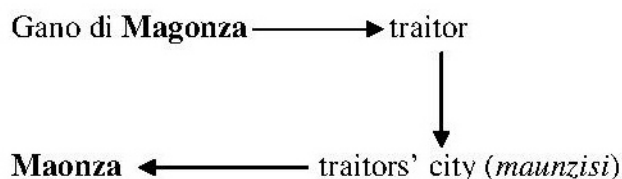


Diagram 2. From *Magonza* to *Maonza*.

The use of “Springfield” denoting Agrigento (or, to use its proper toponymic appellative, “the town of the temples”) is undoubtedly less represented, because it has been recorded by few speakers, and especially young. It has here been mentioned just to give an example of the speakers’ creativity. Springfield is a recurrent toponym in the United States,<sup>11</sup> and is the name of the fictitious town of the American serial cartoon *The Simpsons*. At a first sight this kind of connection might be due to the connotative character of Springfield, considered as an odd, provincial and remote spot, but the knowledge we have of Agrigento folk anthroponymy suggests the following motivation: starting from the *blazon populaire gialli* (yellow),<sup>12</sup> which reminds of the colour of the protagonists of the *Simpsons*, the young of the neighbouring towns have extended the anthroponimic datum to the toponym. (see diagram 3).

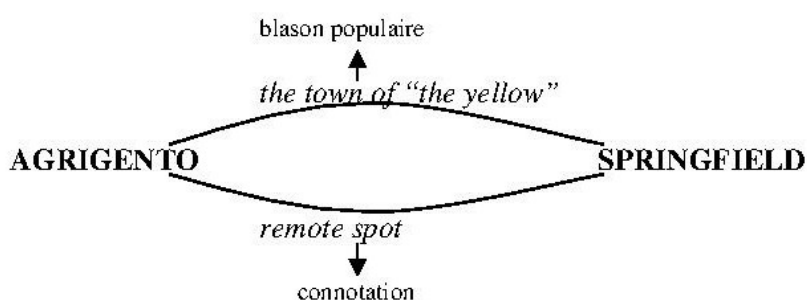


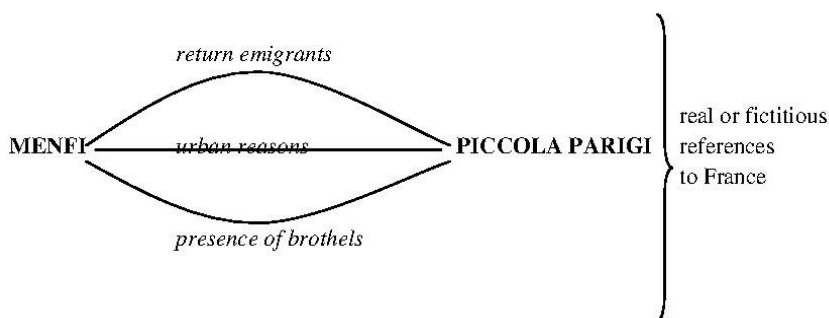
Diagram 3. From Agrigento to *Springfield*.

Even if the appellative of *Piccola Parigi* (Little Paris) recurs quite constantly (see footnote 6), it originates from different motivations.

Regarding Menfi, a town of the province of Agrigento, according to the informants, such an appellative can be due to the following facts: 1- in summertime the little town fills up with emigrants coming back from France; 2- the modern urban structure of the town, whose spacious streets which run parallel one-another, recall the Parisian *boulevards*; 3- before the “Legge Merlin”, the town was famous for its brothels, which recalled such Parisian lascivious collective imagination (see diagram 4).

<sup>11</sup> In the United States 19 towns (among which the capital town of Illinois) and 12 *townships* are called with the name of Springfield.

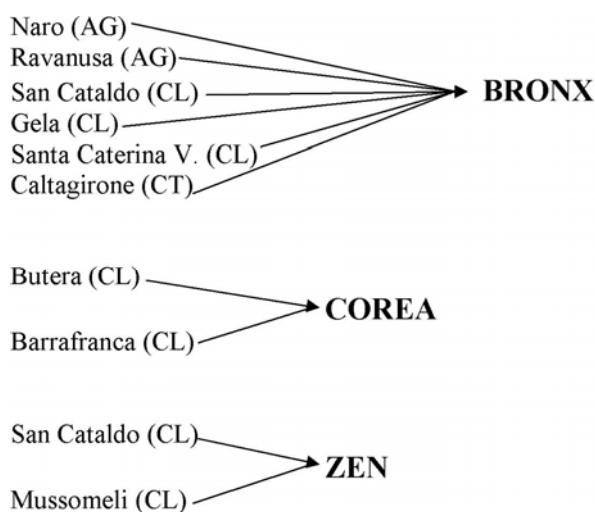
<sup>12</sup> For these motivations see § 4.3 by Castiglione / Burgio 2013 a.



**Diagram 4.** From Menfi (AG) to *Piccola Parigi* (Little Paris)

This naming process, though, doesn't concern just the appellatives exchanges among the towns, but it can take place even within the towns themselves. In Sicily the practice of connoting town popular quarters<sup>13</sup> making reference to places characterized by social degradation is quite common (see diagram 5)

The eight out of ten cases here taken into account, show how the transposition concerns quarters of most known towns, where ghetto and discrimination processes are more perceived: the Bronx of New York known thanks to cinema and TV; the ZEN<sup>14</sup> of Palermo. In two other cases, instead Korea is recalled: distant, exotic place, but with a strongly negative connotation, very likely conveyed by TV films representing the Korean underworld.



**Diagram 5.** Toponymic appellatives referring to some poor quarters of Sicilian towns

### 1.2. From the toponym to the antonomasia

Another element of linguistic curiosity in folk culture<sup>15</sup> can be found in the connoting pathways which regard some toponyms.<sup>16</sup> The inquiries made for the DASES have shown as

<sup>13</sup> The materials here analyzed are drawn from Milia 2010.

<sup>14</sup> ZEN is the acronym for Zona Espansione Nord (Zone of North Expansion) and is a popular quarter with about 16.000 inhabitants and characterized by bad structural and social problems.

<sup>15</sup> This is an expression borrowed from Cortelazzo1984.

<sup>16</sup> Trovato 2008: 255-8 focuses attention on some Sicilian paremiology expressions such as *firriari l'Arca e la Mecca*, *scala di san Jàpicu* and *fari a prizziùncula* all mean "to run around in circles". These expressions contain some references to topographic places linked to Christian and Muslim religious practices, which have undergone a resemantization.

some of them, rather than others, become antonyms,<sup>17</sup> following a pathway going from the first name to the common name.<sup>18</sup>

This is often due to the use of referring to the “other” as different because living in a remote, quite indistinct area, surely poorer, less urbanized and, as a consequence of it, ignorant.<sup>19</sup>

The following examples referring to Sicilian toponyms (see Table 2), show as the “elsewhere place” doesn’t need to be necessarily geographically far away: in fact, it may also be just a few kilometres away, but perceived as “different”:

| Starting area                | Connotated Toponym |
|------------------------------|--------------------|
| Saccense (from Sciacca)      | <i>Cartabbubbu</i> |
| Mid-North Caltanissetta area | <i>Milocca</i>     |
| Mid-West Sicily              | <i>Carrapipi</i>   |
| Most of Italy                | <i>Canicattì</i>   |

**Table 2.** Some Sicilian toponyms connotated as “remote spots”

In most of Italy, the town of Canicattì,<sup>20</sup> in the centre of Sicily, has become the prototype of “remote spot”, while in almost all mid-west Sicily the prototype of “remote spot” is Carrapipi (dialect toponym of Valguarnera Caropepe),<sup>21</sup> while in a more restricted area, *Milocca*, today Milena). Going to even smaller centres, the use of *Cartabubbu*, meant as remote spot, has been registered only in the towns of Sciacca, Menfi e Caltabellotta. These forms are already stable and crystallized. In all these cases, the reason for such forms has probably to be searched in the very nature of those names whose phonolexical effects are very likely perceived as funny; moreover very often they refer to small centres and, above all, quite far from ordinary routes.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, real or imaginary places such as the Last Thule, Atlantis, or the pillars of Hercules used in colloquial language

<sup>18</sup> Migliorini 1927 deals with such cases. As regards the toponyms, see the biblical town of Babylon, become, in the colloquial language, as a synonym of «disordine, tumulto, gran confusione» (“disorder, turmoil, confusion”) (VLI, s.v. *babilonia*).

<sup>19</sup> Gian Luigi Beccaria deals with this time and space rooted contraposition device in a section of his introduction to Faloppa 2004:10-1 supporting it with numerous examples.

<sup>20</sup> There are several accounts especially got by the media, which have provoked the prompt reactions by Canicattì citizens. Here we give just some examples among the most recent ones. In the 2 January 2011 “La Gazzetta dello sport”, the football player Angelo Palombo stated: «this is Milan, not Canicattì». In 11 January 2011 “La Repubblica - Palermo” the ex-basketball player Dan Peterson said: «If I were Proli and this morning I read that Peterson talks as an Olympia technician, I would send him to train in Canicattì», provoking the angry reaction of the President of the basketball team of the town. On the web-site of the “La Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno”, commenting a piece of news referring to the 4th December 2009, a reader from Bari, resentfully answers another one, asking in a provoking tone : «[...] And you, where such a remote place are you writing from to teach us? From Canicattì!?»

<sup>21</sup> In an article entitled “Lipari e Carrapipi e antenne di telefonia” (Lipari and Carrapipi and phone antennas) dating back to just a year ago (18 Giugno 2010) and edited in “Eolie News” (“Notiziario delle Eolie”), the author complained about the fact that his more advanced (according to him) little Island Lipari, «even in Carrapipi” the city hall is able to regulate the mobile antennas... A local newspaper reports that yesterday in the town of Valguarnera Caropepe, in the province of Enna, a “Regulation for phone antennas” was approved». He then adds to it, «In Sicily, to point out a remote and distant place, you make use of traditional expressions referring to “Carrapipi”, that is, to Valguarnera Caropepe, as a synonym of a place at the margins of civilization, forgotten by everybody, indifferent to the progress and to modernity. We learn, instead, that Lipari has snatched this miserable supremacy from “Carrapipi” because “even in Carrapipi” they have been able to realize what can be considered the only instrument capable to save their own territory from the prepotency of the antennas [...]».

The first reason is surely crucial for Canicattì, toponym of Arabic origin<sup>22</sup> which has undergone the paronymology of “town of dogs and cats”.<sup>23</sup> The same can be said regarding *Cartabbubu*, a known land, which has preserved the form of *Cartabubbo* in its official name. In this case, the name with *-bubbu* / *-ubbu* ending may have played a role, due to the negative meanings that such an ending evokes in Sicilian lexicon.<sup>24</sup>

The contrary can be said about Valguarnera Caropepe, not a very busy place because well protected, and whose complete toponym dates back to 1626 (even if only the second element of the name, *Carrapipi*, has been kept in the speakers’ consciousness).

Also as to Milocca, the renaming process the town has undergone during the last century can’t be considered really meaningful,<sup>25</sup> if we recall that Luigi Pirandello in his incisive story «Le sorprese della scienza» (1923) portrays *Milocca* (in those times, not already Milena!), as a remote spot.

These few examples<sup>26</sup> highlight a trend which starting from the biggest place gets to the smallest one, according to a spiral pathway which can be well represented by concentric circles, making reference to places which, however, even if not immediately, can be recognized and identified by the interlocutor.<sup>27</sup>

In brief, a middle-small town (Sciacca) will negatively connote a little distant land (*Cartabbubu*); Quite a compact area such as the mid-northern area of Caltanissetta province, will connote one of the smallest and peripheral centres, *Milocca*; a more extended area, such as almost all Sicily, will refer to *Carrapipi*, a town not well linked because of its streets network and so, quite inaccessible, nonetheless with a considerable demographic consistency (it has more than 8000 inhabitants); many of the inhabitants of our peninsula, instead, perceive as extremely peripheric Canicattì, which, with its 35000 inhabitants is anyway one of the most populated centres of its province and, thanks to a very dynamic economy, plays an important role in trade.

### 3. Conclusions

The lexicon here analyzed paves the way to pathways which, although suggestive, do not seem to be fully satisfactory, and this is due both to the data at disposal, which are quite few and to their stability, which ought to be tested with more field studies. We wonder if there is a lack of real uses (and an approach to the interview focussing on this aspect might be more productive) or if these are related to segments of population (for example the young) or if, the toponymic category itself rouses a minor linguistic creativity in the speakers than, instead, both the individual and the ethnic anthroponymy. Time, and a collation of better analyzed data, which are going to be gathered within the DASES project (or some other project or

<sup>22</sup> «From the Arabic *ḥandaq aṭ-ṭīn* ‘mud moat’» (see DT), the same origin for the other Syracusan Sicilian toponym, Canicattini.

<sup>23</sup> Such expression has been reinterpreted for joke by the poet Marica Riccardelli in a tongue-twister entitled “The dogs and the cats from Canicattì”: “A Canicattì i cani e i gatti/ ratti s’azzuffavano come matti / fino a quando i gatti/ non si chiamaron catti/ calmi caticani di Canicattì” (In Canicattì dogs and cats/rats argued as mad/until the cats/ were called “catti”/calm down caticani” from Canicattì”).

<sup>24</sup> See at least the definition given in the VS/I *catabbubu*, “useless and unwieldy object; fig. a cipher”, *cazzabbubu* “snooping and impudent boy”.

<sup>25</sup> The new toponym Milena is due to 1923 Royal Decree On Milocca / Milena, see Burgio, 2009a, 125.

<sup>26</sup> We can also add Punta di Caronia in Caltanissetta (source DASES), and from spurious sources, Pizzo Calabro and Sardinian Macomer, found in several parts of Italy. There are also false etymologies, used in a jocular sense, as in the case of the Calabrian Cazzovillari as Castrovillari in eastern Sicily. Or it may be of real places and really remote as Timbuktu.

<sup>27</sup> In support of this thesis, it is useful to remember that in Milena, the remote spot *par excellence* is *lu Naduri*, that is Bompensiere, a small neighbouring town of 600 inhabitants.

study), will provide the answer and, as a consequence of it, suggest to follow this way or take some other one.

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