

STUDYING MICROTOPYNYMY IN BELARUS: THE MAIN ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE LAST 60 YEARS

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INTRODUCTION

When it comes to defining the starting point of when the study of microtoponyms, i.e. the names of small geographical objects, became a part of scientific research in Belarus, the beginning is associated with the name of the linguist Â. Adamovič.¹ He wrote the first candidate dissertation with a section devoted to microtoponyms (Adamovič, 1966) and the first monograph on such lexical items (Adamovič, 1971). On the whole, over the last 60 years there have been fourteen candidate dissertations and one doctoral dissertation in which Belarusian microtoponyms are the main object of study, one of them, or an additional focus. Over the years monographs have also been published by Belarusian researchers that analyze the names of small geographical objects, and microtoponym dictionaries have been produced.

BIBLIOGRAPHY ON MICROTOPYNYMY

As a rule, authors that write summarizing publications on Belarusian microtoponymy either limit themselves to listing the names of the researchers and large collections of microtoponyms (Mezenka, 2000; Lemcûgova, 2004; Kapyloŭ, 2018), or to indicating defended dissertations (Mezenka, 2014). One of the reasons for this is the lack of a complete bibliography of Belarusian onomastics, such as those prepared in Poland (Taszycki, 1960; Nobis, 2021) or in Ukraine (Verbič, 2013).

¹ Hereafter, the names and surnames of Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Russians are transferred into Latin letters according to the standard PN-ISO 9-2000.

The bibliographic index titled “Belarusian Onomastics (2000–2015)”, published in 2016 in Viciebsk² (Mezenka, 2016), is the first attempt to create such a directory in Belarus but it far from being comprehensive.

A bibliography on Belarusian onomastics in other periods of time is presented in the following thematic publications (which frequently, and perhaps inevitably, duplicate themselves):

1807–1960 — “Belarusian Onomastics. Materials for the Bibliography” by M. Grynblat (1960);

1812–1965 — “Bibliography of East Slavic Onomastics up to 1965” by M. Kondratiuk (1997);

1825–1991 — relevant sections in the four volumes of the bibliographic index “Belarusian Linguistics” (Šakun, 1967, pp. 317–326; Biryła, 1980, pp. 243–262; Padlužny, 1993, pp. 351–380; Rusak, 2004, pp. 333–376);

1918–1980 — three volumes of the bibliographic index “Onomastics” (Podol’skaâ, 1976; Mdivani & Podol’skaâ, 1978, 1984);

1955–1991 — indexes of works on Belarusian onomastics published in the four volumes of the collection of papers under the general title “Belarusian Onomastics” (Biryła & Lemcûgova, 1977, 1981, 1985, 1992).

If we compare the periods covered by the abovementioned publications, it transpires that there is no bibliographic index of works on Belarusian onomastics covering the period from 1992 to 1999. Some publications from this period are available in textbooks on Belarusian onomastics, such as the one prepared at P. M. Mašëraŭ Viciebsk State University (Mezenko, 2017, 2018); in a bibliographic index referring to the study of the toponymic space of the Brest region (Levancëvič & Âkubuk, 2018), etc.

This situation complicates an assessment of what has been done in the field of Belarusian onomastics in general and in studying microtoponymy in particular. As a result, neither professional researchers nor other interested people have complete information about how many of the names of small geographical objects have been researched and analyzed and in which areas of the country this material has been collected. In this regard, the staff of Âkub Kolas Institute of Linguistics of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus created an electronic bibliography of Belarusian microtoponymy.³ This database is available online

² Hereafter, Belarusian geographical names are transferred into Latin letters according to the *Instruction on transfer of names of geographical objects from the Belarusian and Russian languages into other languages and transliteration of names of geographical objects by letters of the Latin alphabet*, approved in Belarus on 24.03.2023.

³ This database was created as part of the research project *Microtoponymic Linguolandscape of Belarus* (contract with the Belarusian Republican Foundation for Fundamental Research No. G19-078 dated 02.05.2019, supervisor — V. Šklâryk, period of execution — 2019–2021).

at <https://microtop.philology.by/> for public use. In addition, an interactive map and statistics are provided on the website.

As of November 2024 the bibliography contains a total of 520 entries. The chronological range of publications in the database is 1959–2021. At this stage, only entries that were published in Belarus, had localized material, and contained three or more microtoponyms were taken into the account. Publications dealing with toponyms from archival sources and ancient manuscripts were not included in the bibliography. Historical items and publications on folklore and ethnography, which sometimes also contain the names of small geographical objects, were not included in the database either.

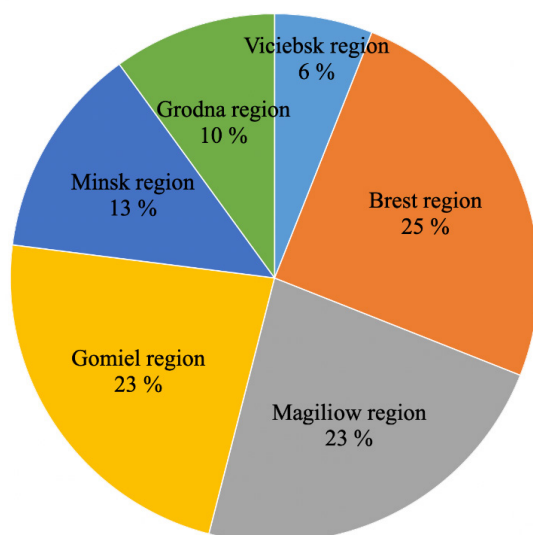


Figure 1. Distribution of the material contained in the publications according to the regions of Belarus

Entries in this bibliography can be sorted by region and district. This allows us to estimate how many microtoponyms have already been researched, in which areas of Belarus, and to what extent such material has been collected. The analysis of this information showed that these publications contain the highest number of microtoponyms from the Brest region (25%), and the lowest number of microtoponyms from the Viciebsk region (6%) (see Fig. 1.). However, there are 42 districts (out of 118 districts in 6 regions of the country) with fewer than 10 publications containing the names of small geographical objects. This accounts for about a third of Belarus and can hardly be considered sufficient to represent the national microtoponymic fund.

DISSERTATIONS ON MICROTOPYNYMY

According to the Ukrainian onomastician S. Verbič, research on Slavic microtoponymy has intensified considerably in the late 20th and early 21st centuries (Verbič, 2021, p. 352). A complex review of the relevant works shows that a great deal of effort has been put into the topic. The number of dissertations is also noteworthy: in Ukraine alone, ten candidate dissertations on microtoponymy were defended between 2001 and 2020 (Verbič, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, p. 353, footnote), with another five underway (Verbič, 2012, 2016).

However, not all Slavic countries are characterized by such an active and extensive study of names for small geographical objects, and Belarus is one such example. According to information received by the author of this paper in December 2021 at the philological (linguistic) chairs of the universities of Brest, Gomiel, Grodna, Magiliow, Mazyr, Minsk and Viciebsk, none of the postgraduates and doctoral candidates were working on a dissertation on microtoponymy. Nor was anyone working on dissertations devoted to the names of small geographical objects at Âkub Kolas Institute of Linguistics of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus. Therefore, when analyzing what had been done in this field by Belarusian scientists, we can only speak about dissertations prepared earlier.

There have only been four candidate dissertations devoted exclusively to local microtoponymy in Belarus (hereinafter the works are presented in chronological order):

A. Pryščëpčyk, “Microtoponymy of the Stowbcy Region” (1970, in Belarusian, under the supervision of M. Biryła). This dissertation presents a structural-grammatical characterisation and lexico-semantic analysis of over 4,000 microtoponyms of the region.

V. Emel’ânovič, “Microtoponymy of the North-Western Part of the Brest Region” (1982, in Russian, under the supervision of M. Biryła). This dissertation analyses the grammatical structure, identifies word-formation types and provides a lexico-semantic characterisation of 3,364 microtoponyms of the region.

H. Îvanova, “Microtoponymy of Mazyr Paliessie” (1986, in Russian, under the supervision of V. Lemcûgova). This dissertation presents a lexico-semantic and structural-grammatical characterisation of 3,820 microtoponyms of the region.

V. Šklâryk, “Microtoponymy of Eastern Paliessie: Linguogeographical and Lexical-Semantic Aspects” (2017, in Belarusian, under the supervision of Î. Kapyloŭ).⁴ This dissertation contains only lexico-semantic characterisation of

⁴ It should be noted that these four candidate dissertations were supervised by staff members of Âkub Kolas Institute of Linguistics of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus (the Academy of Sciences of the BSSR). It demonstrates a kind of academic curatorship of dissertations on microtoponymy in Belarus.

microtoponyms of the region. For this research more than 30,000 names of small geographical objects from different sources were involved.

Candidate dissertation “Nomination of Water Objects in the Belarusian and English Languages: An Onomasiological Aspect (in the Helonyms of Belarus and the USA)” by A. Kopač (2004, in Russian, under the supervision of A. Rudènka) stands out from this list. It differs from the abovementioned dissertations in the following criteria:

- *survey area*: the author focused on reviewing the helonyms from all over Belarus, while the other dissertations only presented microtoponyms from selected regions of the country;
- *sources of material*: Belarusian helonyms are taken from “Cadastral Directory. Peat Fund of the Belarusian SSR” (1979, in 10 volumes) and “Encyclopaedia of Nature in Belarus” (1983–1986, in 5 volumes) (Kopač, 2004, p. 2), while for the other dissertations the authors mainly collected the microtoponyms by conducting expeditions;
- *specifics of the analysis*: helonyms from both Belarus and the USA are characterized in cognitive and onomasiological terms, while the other dissertations contain lexical-semantic and structural-grammatic characteristics of microtoponyms.

However, there have been many more candidate dissertations, in which microtoponyms were considered together with oikonyms and/or hydronyms in Belarus (mainly as supplementary factual material in a comprehensive characterisation of the toponymic space of the regions):

Â. Adamovič, “Toponymy and Microtoponymy of the Sluck Region” (1966, in Belarusian, under the supervision of F. Âankoŭski).

V. Lemcûgova, “Toponymy of the Minsk Region” (1967, in Belarusian, under the supervision of M. Biryła).

A. Katonava, “Hydronymy of Zahodniaja Dzvina River Basin in Belarus” (1975, in Russian, under the supervision of A. Suprun).

N. Smal’, “Hydronymy and Oikonymy of the Pabuzhzhya Region. The Problem of Interaction” (1996, in Belarusian, under the supervision of V. Lemcûgova).⁵

N. Bagamol’nikava, “Hydronymy of the Prypiac River Basin within the Gomieli Region” (1997, in Belarusian, under the supervision of U. Aničënka).

T. Bagaedava, “Hydronymy of the Sozh River Basin (Proto-Slavic fund)” (1997, in Russian, under the supervision of R. Kazlova).

Ì. Kapyloŭ, “Toponymy of Belarusian Manuscripts of the 15th–18th centuries” (2001, in Belarusian, under the supervision of V. Lemcûgova).

⁵ Information about dissertations in Belarusian linguistics defended from 1990 to 2011 is available in a special directory (Dzâtko & Šahoŭskaâ, 2011).

T. Aliferčyk, “Toponymy of Western Paliessie in an Ethnolinguistic Aspect” (2011, in Belarusian, under the supervision of M. Antropaŭ).

V. Mickevič, “Toponymy of Revision of Forests and Animal Trails in the Former Grand Duchy of Lithuania: Lexical-Semantic and Structural-Grammatic Aspects” (2011, in Belarusian, under the supervision of V. Lemcûgova).

As for the doctoral dissertations, the names of small geographical objects are only slightly reflected in the work “Ethnic and Geographical Names as a Source for the Study of Ethnolinguistic History (on the Material of Belarus)” by A. Rogaleŭ (1996, in Russian). Microtoponyms were widely used by A. Kopač during the preparation of his doctoral dissertation (not yet defended as of November 2024). This can be seen in his monograph “Toponymic Space of Belarus in the Cognitive Aspect (Based on the Names of Toponymic Objects of Natural Nomination)” (Kopač, 2020).

DICTIONARIES OF MICROTOPYNOMS, MONOGRAPHS

Almost all of the microtoponym dictionaries published in Belarus have been prepared by professional scientists (i.e. staff members of universities or employees of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus). The first such dictionary was printed in 1974. This book, titled “Microtoponymy of Belarus. The Materials” contains over 9,000 names from all over the country, with a reverse dictionary at the end. The material for this book was collected by 35 people in the period between 1948 and 1972 (Biryla & Mackevič, 1974, pp. 7, 10). Other microtoponym dictionaries include the names of small geographical objects from specific regions of Belarus. For example, “Microtoponym Dictionary of the Magiliow Region” contains around 6,700 names (Klimuc’ et al., 2004); about 10,500 microtoponyms are presented in the first part of “Onomastic Dictionary of the Grodna Region” (Lamaka et al., 2005); more than 9,000 names are included in the dictionary “Microtoponymy of the Brest Region” (Levancèvič et al., 2022). As a rule, the microtoponyms in all these dictionaries are presented in vernacular form, with grammatical marks and often accompanied by the comments of informants. Around 4,400 names from five districts of the Gomiel region were published in the book “Microtoponymy of Mazyr Paliessie” by H. Ivanova (2007). A distinctive feature of this publication is the explanation of the origin of the names of small geographical objects. An example of a microtoponym dictionary created by a local historian (i.e. a non-professional scientist) is “Microtoponymy of the Ivacevichy Region” by A. Zajka (2018). The book contains almost 4,000 names of small geographical objects mainly from the Ivacevichy district of the Brest region, collected by the author from 1995 to 2016. In addition, the dictionary includes microtoponyms found in archival sources from the 16th–19th centuries. It should be noted that almost all of the abovementioned dictionaries are available in digitized form at <https://philology.by/fund>.



Figure 2. From left to right: monograph by V. Škláryk; “Microtoponymy of Belarus. The Materials”; monograph by Ā. Adamovič; “Onomastic Dictionary of the Grodno Region. Vol. 1. Microtoponyms” (photo by U. Barysevič)

As for monographs on microtoponymy, to date there are only two of them in Belarus. The book “Microtoponymic Names” by Ā. Adamovič (in Belarusian) was published in 1971. As was mentioned above, this monograph was the first book on the names of small geographical objects in the country. The author attempted to show the scientific significance and peculiarities of microtoponymy, the sources of microtoponyms and how they are formed, to determine the types and ways how such names could be derived. 4,800 microtoponyms collected by Ā. Adamovič in 115 settlements of several districts of the Minsk and Brest regions became the material for the study (Adamovič, 1971). The second monograph on microtoponymy was only published in Belarus 46 years later. It is a book titled “Microtoponymy of Eastern Paliessie in the Context of Regional Lexical System Development” by V. Škláryk (in Belarusian). The monograph uses extensive factual data (over 30,000 names) as a basis and analyses the lexical-semantic features of microtoponyms from the whole territory of a historical-ethnographic region in south-eastern Belarus (Škláryk, 2017). A distinctive feature of V. Škláryk’s book is the presence of 10 maps showing the locations of appellatives and microtoponyms.

In this context, mention should also be made of several monographs in which microtoponyms are considered together with oikonyms and/or hydronyms. As a few examples, “Belarusian Oikonymy. Linguistic Analysis of the Names of Settlements in the Minsk Region” by V. Lemcûgova (1970), “Hydronyms of the Prypiac River Basin: Structural-Semantic Types of Motivation” by N. Bagamol’nikava (2004), “Toponymy of Western Paliessie: An Ethnolinguistic Aspect” by T. Aliferčyk (2013)

and already mentioned monograph by A. Kopač (2020) (all in Belarusian). In addition, there is a number of comprehensive dictionaries containing not only microtoponyms, but also oikonyms and / or hydronyms. For example, “Geographical and Statistical Dictionary of the Magiliow Region” in 3 volumes (Šaruha, 2012–2013) and a number of dictionaries by A. Rogaleŭ (Rogalev, 2004, 2012, 2015). On the whole, according to the electronic bibliography on Belarusian microtoponymy, there are about 30 books (i.e. monographs, dictionaries, local history books, etc.) on the names of small geographical objects in Belarus.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the data above, it should be stated that as of today microtoponyms in Belarus have not been sufficiently researched. Moreover, not all regions of the country have dictionaries of names for small geographical objects (as is the case with Viciebsk and Minsk regions). This means that collecting and publishing such material is still relevant, and it’s ongoing (this refers, for example, regular publications of microtoponyms in such serial issues as “Belarusian Dialectology” and “Philological Regional Studies of the Grodna Region”). The electronic bibliography of Belarusian microtoponymy, prepared at Âkub Kolas Institute of Linguistics of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, should help to coordinate this work.

Having only four candidate dissertations and two monographs over the course of almost 60 years also indicates the unpopularity of the microtoponymic direction within onomastic research in the country. However, the existence of comprehensive works in which the names of small geographical objects are considered together with oikonyms and/or hydronyms, partially remedies the situation with the low attractiveness of microtoponyms as an object of research. Relatively little work has been done in the field of studying the names of small geographical objects from archival sources and ancient manuscripts, and this is one of the most topical problems in the study of microtoponyms in Belarus.

Thus, the main directions of work for researchers of Belarusian microtoponymy now and in the future are the following: 1) continuation of the collection and publication of such material; 2) research of this material in different aspects, not only descriptive; 3) wide use of material from archival sources; 4) digitization of the collected material and publication of the results of research. An important stage in the study of Belarusian microtoponymy will be the publication of a consolidated register of the names of small geographical objects from different print sources. This register will be a supplement to the “Consolidated Dictionary of Belarusian Dialects”, which is currently under development at Âkub Kolas Institute of Linguistics of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus.

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SUMMARY

The article presents an assessment of the work done by Belarusian researchers for almost 60 years in the field of microtoponymy studies. This analysis was made possible by the creation of an electronic bibliography on Belarusian microtoponymy at Jakub Kolas Institute of Linguistics of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus. Due to the lack of such publication database previously, researching the names of small geographical objects in the country was complicated. Until recently this process had been disorganized, but today there are grounds and opportunities to rectify such situation.

An important feature of the electronic bibliography on Belarusian microtoponymy is the availability to select fields as “Region” and “District”, which can be used to sort the publications. This option makes it possible to assess what has been done in certain regions of Belarus in particular. In other words, this publication database can be used to identify the locations where names of small geographical objects have not been collected and/or have not been researched.

Moreover, the electronic bibliography on Belarusian microtoponymy revealed that for almost 60 years only four candidate dissertations and only two monographs have been devoted to local microtoponyms in the country. However, the low attractiveness of microtoponyms as an object of research in Belarus is partially rectified by a number of comprehensive dissertations and monographs where the names of small geographical objects are analyzed along with oikonyms and/or hydronyms.