Microtoponymy: a paradigm of cultural heritage.
The *Catalan Microtoponymy* as study case
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Toponyms **-** those intangible language-based terms applied to the territory with the goal of facilitating identification, which originate in the oral tradition but which acquire full maturity in the written language and special representational relevance in cartography – are characterised, as cultural phenomena, by two fundamental qualities: they are, on the one hand, indispensable tools in human *communication*; and they are, on the other, given their multiple and diverse thematic nature, an expression of *multidisciplinarity*. (The multidisciplinary approach underpinning onomastics, far from being merely anecdotal, is a constitutive quality of this field of knowledge, inherent in its very essence and *raison d'être*). It is our contention that these two qualities convert toponyms into preeminent elements of our cultural heritage – a heritage whose rigorous study, moreover, requires to consider two premises: their *multiscale* character (in the sense that they project themselves at all scales: from microtoponymy to macrotoponymy) and their *multilingual* dimension (to the extent that the cultural value of a toponym can, in practice, be forged in any language in the world).

Within this broader context, our paper focuses specifically on the heritage value of microtoponymy (i.e. small-scale toponyms, that is, the "system of place names at the municipal scale") in

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the territory of Catalonia, a region of south-west Europe that has its own minority, yet highly dynamic, language (*Catalan*) and whose toponymy have been studied since the beginning of the 20th century attending specially the level of *municipalities* (that is to say: the toponymy at the *local scale*). In the specific terms of our study, we take as point of reference the microtoponymy of a small area of Catalonia: the "comarca" (or district) of El Baix Camp (in the province of Tarragona, Catalonia), comprising 29 municipalities, with a total area of 695 km2 and a population today of nearly 200,000 inhabitants. In this territory a total of 16,500 current place names have been recorded (in the main, 'microtoponyms'), which, duly organised and geographically located, form the 'toponomastic database' previous to the analysis.

Below we identify the most significant conclusions of our study:

a) Toponymy has a geographical dimension that is not limited solely to aspects of a purely "locational" nature. Each name is underpinned by a genealogy which, above and beyond its strictly philological content, has a direct relationship with the space, with all that this implies. The strictly locational nature of toponymy can be represented on a map, whereas the "genealogical" aspects can, in the main, only be addressed through a broad and detailed knowledge of the territory. In this sense, we should stress that, in relation to our work, the study of the toponymy of El Baix Camp has been feasible to the extent that we have had access to some highly detailed toponymic sources, which have provided us with broad and diverse information about the specific characteristics of the territory and about the meaning and history of each toponym.

b) In terms of methodology, it proved essential to build a *corpus* of place names that met our research needs and which was highly operative in practice. The corpus to which we refer constitutes the *basic toponymy* of the comarca. As defined above, it comprises that set of place names that can be

considered as being in use today in the study area. Overall, it includes a total of seventeen thousand toponymic units occurring in the twenty-eight municipalities of the comarca. From the perspective of the thematic distribution, one third of the basic toponymy corresponds to elements in the physical environment, while the other two thirds refer to human activity, in the most general sense of the expression. Despite this marked quantitative difference, we have noted that its territorial significance does not always have the same value. The toponymy of the physical environment is more varied at the micro level; it has a greater lexical diversity and it also presents marked differences between the municipalities (depending on the variation in the physical environment itself). In contrast, the toponymy of human activity responds to a more general pattern of organization and presents a much lower degree of internal diversity.

c) The study of the comarca's toponymy at the micro level has also allowed us to identify some particularly notable similarities and differences in the use of certain generic terms. In so doing, we have been able in some instances to offer a number of detailed clarifications regarding the specific distribution of certain terms of a geographical character (something which to date has remained largely unclear in available toponymic studies and dictionaries). The conclusions of a number of authors on this point are especially useful: "It is often very difficult to assess the real geographical value of a place name" (Rousseau 1960: 171); "(…) no two of the terms [in the sense of 'generic geographical names'] have identical or even nearly identical patterns of distribution (...) because of the areal non-equivalence of the various phenomena named" (Zelinsky 1955: 346); "Every name tends to adopt a specific and limited meaning in space, and to vary from one zone to another. Only a convention held between geographers and lexicographers

would allow us to achieve a standard and extensive meaning for the generality of a language domain" (Casanova 1991: 586).

Having presented the case study, and the specific questions to which it gives rise, our ultimate objective is to determine the extent to which the microtoponymy of Catalonia can be considered a paradigm of the heritage value of toponymy at the local scale, that is, at the level closest to the citizens, and the extent to which this paradigm can be projected (strengthened and defended) onto other "toponymic systems", at different scales, in Europe and in the world in general.