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The Cognitive Approach to Pilgrimage Toponymy

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Abstract: *This article talks about how place-names, especially at religious sites, have special meanings. These names are not just about where something is, they also show how people feel and think about the place. The article uses two examples: Chor-Bakr in Uzbekistan and Glastonbury Tor in England. Chor-Bakr is important for Muslims and reminds people of their religion and history. Glastonbury Tor is a tall hill with Christian stories and makes people feel closer to something holy. The study uses people's stories and ideas to show how names and places help people feel more connected to their faith.*

Key words: *Toponymy, cognitive approach, pilgrimage, conceptual metaphor, image metaphor, symbolic meaning, moral purity, spiritual meaning.*

The study uses qualitative data to examine how pilgrims and communities interpret the meanings of sacred place-names. Through analysis of linguistic metaphors and personal accounts, the article highlights how language shapes spiritual experience and memory. This approach draws on cognitive linguistics, especially the use of image metaphors and conceptual metaphors to understand how people connect with sacred geography.

Toponymy is the study of place-names. Toponymy has traditionally focused on etymology, geography, and history. Scientists have analyzed how names reflect linguistic roots, geographical features, or commemorate historical figures and events. However, recent researches in cognitive linguistics helped to interpret toponymy as more than just a analysis of names. This interdisciplinary approach explores how place-names not only describe locations but also shape human thought, memory, and belief. In particular, pilgrimage toponymy offers a rich field of study, as pilgrims often connect sites with deep

emotional and spiritual significance. Place-names in these contexts are not neutral labels; they can carry metaphorical weight that influences how pilgrims interpret their experiences and surroundings.

One example is *Chor-Bakr*, a well-known pilgrimage site located near Bukhara, Uzbekistan. The name *Chor-Bakr* means “Four Bakrs” in Persian, and it is believed to refer to four descendants of Abu Bakr, the first Caliph of Islam and a close companion of the Prophet Muhammad.¹ Because of this connection, the name carries strong religious meaning. It evokes respect for Islamic history, spiritual lineage, and moral purity. For many visitors, going to *Chor-Bakr* is not just a trip to a historical cemetery, it is a spiritual journey. Pilgrims often describe their visit as a way to reconnect with their faith and heritage. They believe that praying at this site can bring them closer to God’s blessing. In this way, the name and the place support a powerful metaphor common in religious thinking: being physically close to a holy site means being spiritually closer to the divine. This reflects what cognitive linguists call an *image metaphor*, where physical closeness represents emotional or spiritual connection.

In England, some place-names connected to Christian pilgrimage carry deep symbolic meaning. A well-known example is *Glastonbury Tor*, a steep hill in Somerset that has been a site of religious and mystical significance for centuries. The word *Tor* comes from Old English and means a rocky or high hill.² While it originally described the landform, over time it became associated with spiritual and mythical ideas. Glastonbury Tor is often linked to Christian legends and ancient mythology. Some traditions claim it was the Isle of Avalon, the final resting place of King Arthur, a legendary figure deeply tied to Britain’s spiritual heritage. Others believe it may have been a sacred Christian site where early monks experienced visions or retreated for prayer. Because of these stories, the name *Glastonbury Tor* has taken on a deeper meaning, it doesn’t just describe a hill; it represents a place of divine mystery and sacred encounter.

From a cognitive linguistics point of view, the height of the Tor helps create what scholars call an image metaphor where something physical, like *height*, represents something abstract, like *spiritual closeness to God*. In this case, going up the hill is often experienced by pilgrims and visitors as a symbol of rising toward something greater, a divine presence or higher truth.³ This metaphor “*Up is closer to heaven*” is common in many religious traditions and is clearly reflected in how people talk about and experience places like Glastonbury Tor.

Cognitive linguistics sees language as a reflection of how humans conceptualize the world. Metaphor is not merely a stylistic device but a fundamental mechanism of thought.⁴ In toponymy, metaphors help map abstract spiritual or emotional experiences onto concrete geographical entities. For example, when people say “*life is a journey*” they are using a metaphor to help understand something complex (life) through something more familiar (a journey). These are called *conceptual metaphors*, and they shape the way we talk, feel, and act.

These kinds of metaphors do more than just name locations, they also carry cognitive and cultural meanings.⁵ They help people understand their faith through symbols, images, and stories attached to the land. In both Uzbekistan and England, place-names linked to pilgrimage serve as narrative tools

¹ Ismailbekova, A. (2017). Pilgrimage and Sainthood in Central Asia: The Politics of Space and Memory in Uzbekistan. In: Degregori, C.I. & Gilmartin, D. (Eds.), *Sacred Journeys and Ethnographic Borders*.

² Oxford English Dictionary 2024.

³ Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors We Live By*. University of Chicago Press

⁴ Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors We Live By*. University of Chicago Press

⁵ Reszegi, K. (2023). A Cognitive Approach in Onomastics: Some Notes on Metaphorical Place-Names.

and metaphorical frameworks. They shape how people view holy sites, guide their emotional expectations, and support spiritual transformation. As such, these names play an active role in how people experience and imagine the sacred.

Although Uzbekistan and England differ in terms of language, culture, and religious history, the way they name pilgrimage sites shows some surprising similarities. This is especially clear when viewed through the lens of cognitive linguistics, which explores how people use language to understand abstract ideas through familiar, physical experiences (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In both countries, place-names used in pilgrimage contexts are more than just labels for physical locations. Instead, they act as metaphorical expressions of spiritual beliefs. One common metaphor found in both traditions is *the link between spiritual elevation and physical height*. For example, Glastonbury Tor, a hill in Somerset, England, is seen as a mystical place where pilgrims feel closer to the divine. Similarly, in Uzbekistan, many Sufi shrines are located on hills or elevated terrain. The physical act of climbing a hill becomes a metaphor for *rising spiritually* or *drawing nearer to God* a metaphor that is deeply rooted in human experience across cultures.⁶

Another shared metaphor is the idea of holiness as a substance—something that can be absorbed, felt, or transferred. This is what cognitive linguists call an ontological metaphor, where an abstract idea (like holiness) is treated as a concrete object. At Chor-Bakr in Uzbekistan, for example, pilgrims believe that praying at the site allows them to receive blessings or be spiritually “filled” with sacred power. The same belief can be seen at Canterbury Cathedral in England, where the shrine of St. Thomas Becket has attracted pilgrims since the Middle Ages. Touching, praying, or even being near the site is believed to bring healing and grace (Sumption, 1975).

Both traditions also use place-names as narrative tools that tell stories and shape how visitors experience a sacred site. In Uzbekistan, the name Sufi Allayar refers to a 17th-century scholar and mystic, and immediately evokes a story of piety, poetry, and spiritual insight. In England, Walsingham calls to mind the medieval legend of the Virgin Mary’s appearance and the miraculous foundation of a shrine. These names function like verbal entry points into a sacred narrative, influencing how pilgrims *think about*, *prepare for*, and *remember* their visits.⁷

Cognitive linguistics helps explain why these metaphors are so widespread. According to this perspective, many spiritual concepts come from basic human experiences of the body and the physical world. For example:

1. The effort of climbing maps onto the idea of spiritual struggle or aspiration.
2. A shelter or container (like a shrine or tomb) becomes a symbol of inner peace or divine presence.
3. The direction of a journey (toward or away from a sacred place) represents the moral path of a believer.
4. The warmth or brightness of light becomes a metaphor for enlightenment or divine truth.

These experiences are common across human life, so the metaphors that grow from them appear in many different cultures and religious traditions. When these metaphors are embedded in place-names, they give sacred geography a rich layer of emotional and symbolic meaning. In short, while the surface details of Uzbek and English pilgrimage practices differ, the way sacred places are named shows

⁶ <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1006155>

⁷ Reszegi, K. (2023). A Cognitive Approach in Onomastics: Some Notes on Metaphorical Place-Names.

shared cognitive patterns. These patterns reflect how deeply human thought, language, and spirituality are connected.

Place-names have always held power, but a cognitive approach to toponymy reveals new depths to their influence, especially in pilgrimage contexts. In Uzbekistan and England alike, names of sacred places are not neutral descriptors but metaphorical gateways to understanding, memory, and belief. Through cognitive metaphors, these names map the spiritual onto the physical, turning ordinary geography into sacred landscape. By examining the metaphorical structures embedded in pilgrimage toponymy, we gain insight not only into religious language but also into the universal patterns of human cognition. The act of naming, particularly in sacred contexts, is an act of meaning-making one that continues to guide the pilgrim's path both across terrain and within the self.

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