

Official toponymy and popular toponymy: the contribution of dialect forms and ethnotexts in the etymological and motivational reconstruction of (micro)toponyms

Elvira Assenza

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Abstract

This paper outlines the results of a number of microtoponomastic surveys conducted in Sicily with local informants who, in addition to providing dialect forms, have also described the places referred to given reasons for their names, and have told tales of the ‘facts’ connected with the place names investigated. Through a selected sample of the data collected, I wish to show how such material is important not only inasmuch as it can add to the written toponymy by providing place names that have as yet been unrecorded in the maps of the IGM (Istituto Geografico Militare), but also and above all in the fact that this data suggests forms and reasons for place names that are far from those given in the official records. Competing names, allotropes, and fluctuations in phonetic and morphological terms serve both to shed light on the relationship that exists between dialect place names and their translated equivalent in Italian and to clarify explanations and reconstructions that, though based on trusted sources, are not always convincing. We can think of the microtoponym Suro, given in Caracausi as meaning ‘walls surrounding a town’ (< ar. sur) but that in its dialect form instead appears to come from *suru* ‘cork’, the place in case being so-named for the large numbers of cork plants in the vicinity. Another example is that of microtoponym Cannatieddu (‘wine flask’), that is not registered in the maps of the IGM, and whose naming can be explained by looking at ethnotext that refer to a small watering trough where the water was tinted pink as a result of its high copper content.

Our knowledge of *Namengebung*, which has been up to now based on official forms, may thus be enriched through taking into consideration the information provided in ‘spoken’ toponymy that shows itself to be an essential factor in the provision of accurate etymological and motivational reconstructions.

The mosaic of toponomastic studies in Sicily is composed of important tesserae: beginning with Alessio’s extensive work on the Greek element in Sicilian toponomastics, published in two successive scholarly works by the *Centro di Studi Filologici e Linguistici Siciliani* (Centre for Sicilian Philological and Linguistic Studies) in Palermo.

Alessio’s study was followed by a valuable array of contributions of which we must mention at least Parlangèli 1956, Pellegrini 1989 and 1990, and Trovato’s 1997 study of Gallo-Italic toponomastics, and finally “Caracausi’s weighty onomasticon of 1993, dedicated to both family and place names [...]. It is based on papers produced by IGM (*Istituto Geografico Militare* [Italian Military Institute]), on the Italian maps of the TCI (*Touring Club Italiano* [Italian Touring Club]), on telephone directories and, obviously, on the extensive bibliography cited, comprising over all [...] the considerable number of more than forty thousand lemmata (structured with grammatical indications, localization and territorial distribution, with sources, etymology and discussion, variations found, cross references to closely linked terms, and finally essential bibliographical data)” (Zamboni 2002: 29).

As the examples above illustrate, Sicilian toponymy has a considerable repertory and against the backdrop of these studies the position of Sicily itself is by no means secondary. Both older and more recent literature – including the work of Caracausi – has, however, been based almost exclusively on toponyms that have already been documented and which appear on maps, basing research procedures mainly on official and written sources.

Little attention has been paid to oral (i.e. dialect) forms and their documentative value, where these sources could allow more detailed anthropogeographic and territorial mapping.

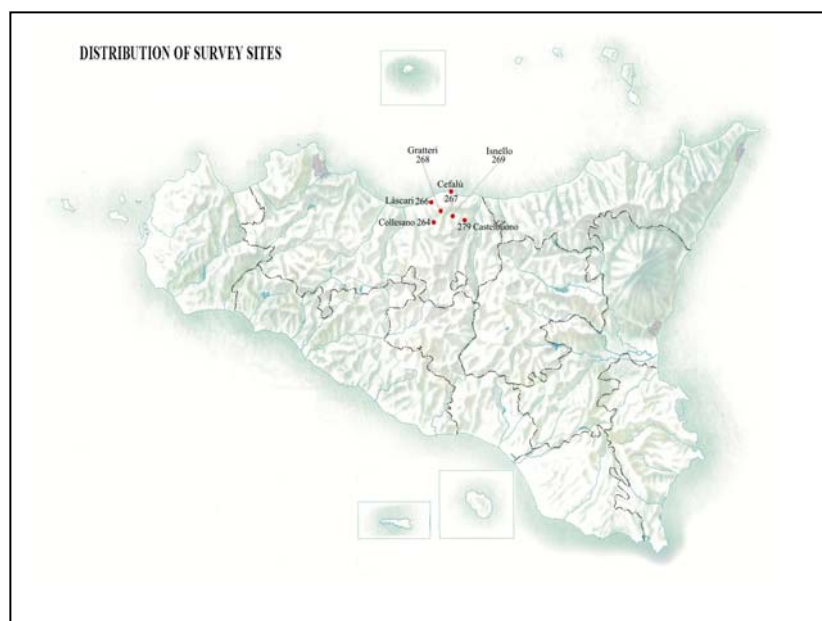
As part of the research undertaken for the *Atlante linguistico della Sicilia (ALS)* (Sicilian Language Atlas) by the *Dipartimento di Scienze Filologiche e Linguistiche* (Department of Philological and Linguistic Sciences) of the University of Palermo and the *Centro di Studi Filologici e Linguistici Siciliani*, a project was thus developed to collect the dialect names of local toponyms in the most systematic and comprehensive manner possible, so as to “compare a cartographic toponymy with what we could call a spoken toponymy.” (Ruffino 1995: 135). A series of micro-territorial studies were carried out for the purposes of “updating and checking the linguistic and topographical features of toponyms that were mapped and recorded” and in order to “enhance the toponomastic archive with hitherto undocumented micro-toponyms which were now being gathered in their dialect form” (*Id.*: 142).

Dialect names of places may differ greatly from their official equivalents and can thus prove important in providing a more detailed understanding of a toponym, inasmuch as they allow us to associate names with the physical places, facts and events to which they are linked and which “in some cases, even today, justify the toponyms in local people’s minds” (Bonura & Rizzo 2007: 426).

In this sense, an important contribution also comes, apart from the dialect names, from ethnotexts produced by local informants, or as a conscious process of popular etymology (which may converge or be at variance with the reconstruction of the linguist), or as a set of data underlying the intentional information which reaches the specialist through the description of the place or events that have occurred there.

This paper aims to show the importance of ‘spoken’ toponymy (and of the ethnotexts gathered in the field), focusing the discussion, with cross reference to Caracausi (1993), on some popular micro-toponyms taken from recent research carried out mainly in Gratteri, a town in the province of Palermo – in the Madonita area – and in part in the surrounding area (Lascari, Cefalù, Isnello, Collesano and Castelbuono).¹

The locations are shown by the numbers 268; 266; 267; 269; 264 and 278 in the ALS,² as illustrated in the figure below:



¹ The material in question is taken from Fragale 2008-09.

² For further information see G. Ruffino 1995b.

Though no doubt clear to scholars in the field, it is at this point worth noting, albeit briefly, the distinction between macro- and micro-toponymy. The former includes coronyms (names for defined areas and institutionalized geographical regions), oronyms, hydronyms and names for human settlements (towns and communities). The latter instead refers to smaller residential settlements (parishes, hamlets, or even wards), and odonyms (names of squares, residential street names and the names of main roads). While macro-toponymy refers to the toponyms registered on maps and therefore to the official topolexicography, micro-toponymy is never entirely mappable and many toponyms exist only in the names given to them by local residents.³

Like macro-toponyms, even micro-toponyms are formed in three basic ways: (1) a simple lemma which acts as a geographical identifier. This may be a noun (for example, *Agliastru* ‘oleaster’; *Uzzulinu* ‘hawthorn’; *Chiuppu* ‘poplar’; *Carvuni* ‘coal’) or an adjective (for example, *Ucchiutu* ‘having many eyes’) and is commonly subject to a process of antonomasia through the addition of a determiner (an article and/or preposition), for example, *A Chiusa* ‘the enclosure’; (2) a derivate by means of a suffix, generally creating names of a place, of an agent (for example, *Agniddaria* ‘butcher’s shop specialising in mutton and lamb’; *Palummaru* ‘dovecot or pigeon house’), or of altered forms such as diminutives, augmentative, or pejoratives (for example, *Carrubbièdda* ‘carob bean or pod’; *Minnulidda* ‘grove of almond trees’; *Urtazzu* ‘vegetable or kitchen garden’; *Funnunni* ‘a large piece of privately owned land’; *Alivazza* ‘wild olive trees’; *Vaniddazza* ‘neglected or overgrown private footpath’); (3) a compound term either without a conjunction (for example, *Vadduni siccu* ‘dry gorge or valley’; *Vaddi giglia* ‘valley of the lilies’; *Chianu purrazzi* ‘the plain where leeks grow’), or with a linking word (for example, *Vaddi di l’uoru* ‘the Valley of Gold’; *Chianu â Nuci* ‘the plain where walnut trees grow’).

With regard to their genesis, toponyms generally consist of motivated forms or expressions deriving from a need to codify what may initially have been an indication of a descriptive nature, referring to the shape and nature of the land, the surrounding flora and fauna, or to various forms of human settlement. In addition to descriptive toponyms personal toponyms which can be traced to the names of persons (founders or owners) and to names of saints are also found.

Toponyms may be classified using the following toponomastic categories:

GEOTOPONYMS

These may be: (1) based on land measurements (for example, *Quaranta sarmi* ‘forty *salme*’;⁴ *Serra di quattru tùmmina* ‘hothouse plantation of four *tummoli*’);⁵ (2) determined by the presence of minerals or based on land and water features (for example, *Cuozzu Viddicu* ‘navel hill’; *Cuticchiu Russu* ‘red rock’; *Rutta Russa* ‘red cave’); (3) relating to climatic conditions (*Cuozzu Tummurinu* ‘hill where a local wind (called the *Tummurinu*) blows’; *Rrisinu* ‘dew’).

PHYTOTOPONYMS

These relate to the presence *in loco* of a particular type of wild or cultivated vegetation (*Agliastru* ‘oleaster’; *Lannaru* ‘oleander’; *Serra ddisi* ‘land of tussock grass’; *Finucchiara* ‘fennel’; *Nucciddi* ‘hazelnuts’).

³ Cf. Beccaria 1996: 728.

⁴ *Salma* is a Sicilian local unit of measurement corresponding to about 34.288m².

⁵ *Tummolo* is a Sicilian local unit of measurement corresponding to about 2.143m².

ZOOTOTOPONYMS

These are connected to the local fauna (*Vurparu* ‘foxes den’; *Cucchi* ‘owls’; *Sciucca* ‘brood hen’).

AGROTOPONYMS and ECOTOPONYMS

These relate to the presence of human activity (*Marcatieddu* ‘a small sheep pen’; *Urtazzu* ‘large kitchen garden’; *Chianu Rassurieddi* ‘the plain of the dunghills’; *Stazzuni* ‘a factory producing terracotta crockery’; *Chiusa* ‘an enclosure’).

ANTHROTOPONYMS

These are mostly of predial origin (relating to the ownership of large areas of land) or in some way derived from people’s names, formed in a more or less evident manner with suffixes or derivatives with zero semantic content (*Barunissa* ‘baroness’; *Giocomiettu* ‘Giacomo’; *Miciliedda* ‘Michelina’; *Lunardu* ‘Leonardo’).

AGIOTOPONYMS

These are based on places of worship such as churches or chapels dedicated to saints or taking a name that refers to God. In the middle ages, when villages grew around churches they commonly took the same name (*San Ciuorgi* ‘Saint George’; *San Ciuvanni* ‘Saint John’; *San Micheli* ‘Saint Michael’).

Procedures for the formal and semantic analysis of toponyms are, however, not always easy to apply. As Giovan Battista Pellegrini observes in his foreword to the *Dizionario di Toponomastica* (DT 1990: VII), “the scientific interpretation, although well-founded, of proper names, be they toponyms or, as is mainly the case, family names, surnames or anthroponyms, is a complex and uncertain process, certainly one of the most difficult in the field of historical linguistics, which centres on etymological research”. It is clear that, as Pellegrini continues, “if a toponym corresponds (or may correspond) to the meaning expressed by a geographical name that has been used or is already in use in or around the place concerned, it is plausible to accept this as the meaning – often, but not always, given possible changes in the landscape or geographical situation of a place.” (*Ibid.*).

Of these toponyms, the easiest to interpret are clearly those which, when passing from oral to written form, do not undergo substantial changes (that is, changes not beyond phonomorphological normalization towards Italian). In this case, the motivational reconstruction of the specialist often corresponds to the etymology supplied by the speaker. Though perhaps of lesser interest, it is worth giving an example: the microtoponym *Difesa*, [defence], in dialect *Dufisa*, which Caracausi believes derives from the medieval Latin *defensa* [land] with the meaning of ‘forbidden land’ but which those interviewed instead referred to a steep slope which in the past acted as a means of natural defence for the castle:

<p>Difesa: (IGM 260 IV N.O.)⁶ Caracausi (I: 528): from the medieval Latin <i>Defensa</i> (land) ‘forbidden land’</p>	<p>→ <i>Dufisa</i> Ethnotext: è u terreno <i>chi c’è sutta</i>:/ <i>u terrenu duocu sutta</i> è Difesa. Difesa è significa che era era la difesa del castello [...] <i>picchi ntô cuozzu cci-era u castello. na lista ripida cosi cci-era. era difesa naturale.[...] è difesa naturale perché è tutta lista / lista significa è tutta rrupe / liscia. ‘a Dufisa’</i></p>	<p>Translation: it is the land that lies below... / the land down there is Difesa [‘defence’]. ‘Difesa’ means that it defended the castle [...] because at the top was the castle, there was a slope as steep as that and it was a natural defence [...] it was a natural form of defence because: it was all one smooth slope was quite smooth, the Dufisa</p>
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⁶ N.O. = northwest.

In some cases, the academic etymology is unintentionally confirmed by the description of the place. The hamlet called **Cannatello**, in dialect *Cannatieddu*, registered on the maps of the TCI and the IGM, in the territory of Gratteri and in various other Sicilian locations is shown by Caracausi (I: 276) to be the diminutive of *cannata* or of *cannatu* ‘reed bed’; with reference to Alessio (1953: 99) who, for related toponyms in the Catania area *Cannata* (Randazzo) and *Cannatedda* (located at Trecastragni STS. 79) identifies a Greek root *κav(v)άτα* ‘jug or ewer’, in Sicilian *cannata* ‘ewer’ (first appearing in the 9th century).

The reason for the diminutive form *cannata* – which more specifically indicates a ‘pot-bellied jug of varying capacity, used for any liquid but particularly for broaching wine from the barrel or for pouring it’ (VS,⁷ I: 275) – becomes clearer (though not intentionally) in the ethnotext of a local referent who speaks of a small trough of water tinged red (i.e. the colour of wine) due to the high copper content:

<p>Cannatello (Contr^a) (IGM 260 III S.E.⁸ and N.O.) Caracausi (I: 276): diminutive of <i>Cannata</i>, or of the Sicilian <i>cannatu</i> ‘reed bed’ ↓ Cf. Alessio 1953: 99, <i>Cannata</i> (Randazzo) (IGM 273,12); <i>Cannatedda</i> (Trecastragni STS.⁹ 79) < gr. <i>κav(v)άτα</i> ‘jug’, cf. sic. <i>cannata</i> ‘ewer’ (dated to 1092), Pirro 1034; STC.¹⁰ 1809, 1810, ep. Sic. <i>Canata</i>.</p>	<p>→ Cannatieddu Ethnotext: <i>Cannatieddu</i> è una <i>contrada ieni di dda latata dû paisi / Cannatieddu... ma non lo so il significato di stu cannatieddu. c'iera nna brivatura duocu Cannatieddu di acqua rramusa [...]</i> a Laschiri <i>primu vivievunu st'acqua di rrami. tutta acqua rramusa ca è buona come / qualità / solo che è brutta di gusto [...]</i> a <i>cannata</i> significa recipienti <i>anni si metteva u vinu / 'a cannata'</i>.</p>	<p>Translation: <i>Cannatieddu</i> is a hamlet, it's on that side of the town/ <i>Cannatieddu ... I don't know what this Cannatieddu means. There was a drinking trough there, with water full of copper [...] in Lascari, in the past, they drank this coppery water; all water with copper in it is good / quality / only it tastes bad [...] the cannata means the container where the wine was kept / 'the cannata'.</i></p>
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Ethnotexts may also contribute to some extent to resolving etymological puzzles. For the place **Giampietra**, the spoken toponym of which is *Giappietru*, Caracausi leans towards a derivation from the female form of the surname ‘Giampietro’, and considers it “less likely” to come from a tautological form of the Arabic *hagar* (stone) and the Latin *petra* (boulder). Albeit “less probable”, this hypothesis is, however, confirmed by the informants, who without hesitation explain the toponym as being based on the geomorphology of the place which is dominated by a mountain formed of an uninterrupted ring of rock:

<p>Giampietra: (IGM 260 IV N.O.) Caracausi (I: 710): feminine form of the surname <i>Giampietro</i>; less likely, tautological composition from the Arabic <i>ḥaḡar</i> ‘stone’ and the Latin <i>petra</i> i.e. ‘boulder’</p>	<p>→ Giappietru Ethnotext: <i>Giappietru</i> è <i>nna montagna tutta di pietra. [...]</i> <i>picchi è tuttu pietra. [...]</i> e <i>nna roccia tutta pietra. nna roccia di pietra tutta completa.</i></p>	<p>Translation: Giappetro is a mountain all made out of stone [...] because it's all stone [...] a rock all made of stone. A rocky mountain made of one big piece of stone.</p>
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But frequently, despite the fact that maps provide a faithful translation of popular toponyms, the representations that the speakers give to places they visit on a daily basis indicate motivational aspects that are in direct contrast with the specialist's own interpretation. For example, Caracausi (II: 1348) gives the toponym **Resino**, in dialect *Rrisinu*, as a diminutive

⁷ VS = *Vocabolario Siciliano*. Cf. Bibliography.

⁸ S.E. = southeast.

⁹ STS = Avolio (1898), *Saggio di toponomastica siciliana*. Cf. Bibliography.

¹⁰ STC = Alessio (1939), *Saggio di toponomastica calabrese*. Cf. Bibliography.

of the surname *Reso*, with cross reference to the toponym *Reso* Faragone, believing this “may come from the Italian *réso* ‘given back’, perhaps originally the name of a person who replaced a deceased son”. According to those interviewed, the toponym, with its local form *Rrisinu*, takes its name from the damp and airless terrain, a hollow or dell with a great amount of *rrisinu* (< Latin *ros, roris*), i.e. ‘dew or thick sea mist, harmful to plants, a word that is also used to refer to ‘plant rust’, a disease affecting cereals, especially wheat (VS, IV: 210):¹¹

<p>Resino (IGM 260 IV N.O.) Caracausi (II: 1348) from the diminutive of the surname <i>Reso</i> which may come from the Italian <i>réso</i> ‘given back’, perhaps originally the name of someone who replaced a deceased son.</p>	<p>→ Rrisinu Ethnotext: <i>Rrisinu</i> significa terreno acquitrinoso. terreno che fa <i>câ</i> ruggiada. è una malattia // ‘a risina’. [...] <i>fa siccari puru i pianti</i>. Basta <i>anticchia</i> di ruggiada <i>puoi</i> spunta <i>u sulì cuomu uoggi e a pianta</i> [...] perché c’è questa: è una conca che dove ci dorme l’umidità è pericoloso per l’inverno / per questo periodo. <i>vigni cuosi e cunti</i> <i>soffrunu</i> maledettamente a via di <i>solfu e bbagni</i>.</p>	<p>Translation: <i>Rrisinu</i> means marshy land; the land of misty dew it’s a disease // the <i>risina</i> [...] it kills off even the plants and bushes. Just a bit of mist is enough then the sun comes up like today and the plant [...] because there’s this: it’s a dell which where the damp lies and it’s dangerous in the winter / for this time of year. Vines and all kinds of other things are badly affected by it because of the sulphur and the wet.</p>
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Caracausi puts forward two possible etyma for the area called **Suro**, local name *Suru*: it may come from the Latin family name *Surus*, (as in *feudum Suro* near Gratteri), but “better” from the Arabic *sūr* i.e. ‘wall surrounding a city’. In the interviews given here it instead seems possible to trace the motivation of the toponym to the dialect form *su^uru* ‘sughero’ [cork], in light of the prior existence of a large cork plantation in the area which today can no longer be seen:

<p>Suro (IGM 260 IV N.O) Caracausi (II: 1588): perhaps from the gentilial Latin name <i>Surus</i> cf. <i>feudum Suro</i>, near Gratteri, Barberi III, p. 405) but better interpreted as coming from the Arabic <i>sūr</i> ‘wall surrounding a city or town’ Trovato,¹² p. 124, ‘wall’, ‘enclosure’ Wehr,¹³ p. 514.</p>	<p>→ Su^uru Ethnotext: <i>Suru</i> secondo me / è il migliore feudo che c’è n-territorio di Gratteri. Suro deriva da una parte di <i>sutta</i> era coperta di sugheri. <i>U su^uru</i> si fa si decortica / a pianta di <i>su^uru</i> e si fa il sughero / <i>u chiamamu su^uru</i>.</p>	<p>Translation: For me Suro / is the best estate in the area around Gratteri. Suro comes from an area down there that was covered in cork trees. Cork is made you strip the bark from the trees / the cork tree and make cork / around here they call it <i>Suru</i>.</p>
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Similarly, Caracausi (I: 1675) identifies the toponym **Uttero (Cont^a)**¹⁴ as follows: “referring to the surname *Uttieri*, [typical of the Taranto and Naples areas] and to the word *Buttièri* ‘bottaio’ [a cooper], cf. French *Boutier*, from the Germanic *Both-hari or ‘seller of wineskins’”. However, the form given by the informants below is that of the proparoxytone *Ùtturu*, which in Sicilian means ‘craw or throat’ (VS), together with the variant *Zuotta* ò *utturu* where *zuotta* means ‘ditch, natural or man-made hole in the ground, of varying size, not particularly deep, where water tends to collect’ (VS, V: 1318). The shape of the hamlet seems to be much more in line with the description provided by the interviewees:

¹¹ Not knowing the dialect form has also led the topographer to further corruptions, as in reference to a seemingly “incomprehensible” toponym from the Agrigento area, *Cesinata*, which instead corresponds to the spoken form *rrisinata* (from *rrisina* ‘frost’) (Ruffino 2000: 48).

¹² Trovato = G. Trovato. 1949. *Sopravvivenze arabe in Sicilia*. Monreale: Casa editrice Vena.

¹³ Wehr = H. Wehr. 1979. *A dictionary of modern written Arabic (Arabic-English)*. Wiesbaden: J. Milton Cowan.

¹⁴ Cont^a is short for *Contrada* ‘district’.

<p>Uttero (Cont^a) (IGM 260 IV N.O) Caracausi (I:1675): see Utteri (Cont^a) (IGM 253 I S.E.): “cf. surname <i>Utteri</i> TA, NA and <i>Buttièri</i> ‘cooper’ DCI,¹⁵ fr. <i>Boutier</i>, from Germ. *Both-hari or ‘seller of wineskins’, Dausat.</p>	<p>→ <i>Ùtturu</i> or <i>Zuotta ô Ùtturu</i> Ethnotext: <i>Utturu ieni perché è una gola. nna gola ntâ muntagna / nte sta vallata c’è stu vadduni. e dduocu u chiamaru u utturu perché c’è sta gola chiusa / chi vva versu i piedi ...</i></p>	<p>Translation: <i>Ùtturu</i> is because there is a gorge. A gorge there; there in the mountain / in this valley there is this deep gorge and that’s called the <i>utturu</i> because there is this enclosed gorge that runs down to the ground ...</p>
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The last, but by no means less interesting section of this paper will consider cases where misunderstandings and erroneous transcriptions occur when moving from the spoken form of a toponym to its official form, leading to corruptions and misinterpretations which render the original forms opaque (or, in some cases, deceptively transparent) hindering correct interpretation.¹⁶ In such cases, as Ruffino (2000: 47) points out, “comparison with the traditional oral form may make it possible to reach the correct etymological interpretation and to trace the toponym’s true motivation”.

This is where we find competing designations, allotropisms, and unstable or changing phonetic or morphological forms, but also descriptions and narratives that may shed light both on the relationship that exists between dialectal toponyms and their Italian translation, either on apparently unfeasible explanations and reconstructions which, however authoritative they may seem, remain ultimately unconvincing.

For example, the case of the toponym **Torrebrusso**, unclear in its official form as registered by Caracausi (II: 1634). No information on its etymology is provided. The dialectal toponym rectifies the misinterpretation of the mapped form, restoring *Sdirripussu*, which can be traced to the original deverbial form *Sdirubbu Rrussu* (‘red slippery land’/ ‘red precipice’), with the disappearance of the unstressed final syllable of the first word. In fact, informants link the toponym to the Sicilian *sdirrupari* ‘slip, fall, demolish’:

<p>Torrebrusso (IGM 260 IV N.O) (Caracausi, II: 1634) ↓ Cf. Dirupo Bianco (C^{se}) (IGM 260 III N.O.) from the Italian <i>dirupo</i> deverbial from <i>dirupare</i> ‘fall from a cliff’, DEI¹⁷ (Caracausi I: 539) Cf. Dirupo Rosso (C^{zo}¹⁸) (IGM 276 I N.O.) (Caracausi I: 539) → <i>Stirubbu Rrussu</i> (Sgarioto, 1999: 263).</p>	<p>→ <i>Sdirripussu</i> Ethnotext: <i>Sdirripussu è n-pezzo di terreno n-contrada Carvuni. [...] un terreno ca ieni scivoloso ca unu s-allavanca. si sdirrupa.</i></p>	<p>Translation: <i>Sdirripussu</i> is a piece of land in the Carbone hamlet [...] its land is slippery and a person can fall. They can fall off the edge.</p>
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¹⁵ DCI = E. De Felice. (1978). *Dizionario dei cognomi italiani*. Milano: A. Mondadori.

¹⁶ In 1971 during a convention organized by the Centro di Studi per la Dialettologia Italiana (Italian Dialect Study Centre), Traversi was one of the first supporters of the need to accompany the work of cartographers with “toponomastic revision” on “specific scientific, glottological and philological grounds”: “the topographer is competent in a particular field, that of enquiring about the names of various topographical and geographical elements by asking the inhabitants of an area who then often provide answers in dialect. The topographer is neither a glottologist nor a philologist and rarely knows the dialects of the various regions where work is being done” and is thus “obliged to create a working group in each place visited” which makes use of “local ‘experts’ (who more often than not are simply local policemen or town clerks) to discuss the validity and the precise transcription of each name [...] without saying any more, it is easy to understand what the real validity of such a system can be. Even if people say and do things in good faith and everyone does the best they can, that is no guarantee of the scientific accuracy of the results nor does it preserve the local toponomastic heritage” (Traversi 1971: 210-11).

¹⁷ DEI = Battisti (1950-57), *Dizionario etimologico italiano*. Cf. Bibliography.

¹⁸ C^{zo} is short for regional Italian *Cozzo* (sic. *Cozzu*) ‘hillock’ or ‘knoll’.

This reconstruction is confirmed by the existence of equivalent forms found both close to the same area and further afield. For example, in the nearby area of Gratteri, the micro-toponyms registered in Caracausi (I: 539), *Dirupo Bianco* (C^{se})¹⁹ ('white cliff') – from the Italian *dirupo* [crag, cliff-face, precipice] deverbal form of *dirupare* 'to fall from a crag' – and again, further away (in Ragusa) we find *Dirupo Rosso* (C^{zo}), registered as its official form in Caracausi (I: 539) and in its dialect version *Stirubbu Rrussu* in Sgarioto (1999: 263) who refers to archive documents dating from 1567.

This brief review of examples concludes by presenting a final case which serves to summarise and encapsulate a two-fold process of misinterpretation of forms – both by local speakers and, at a later date, by topographers – whilst also showing the heuristic value of the ethnotext.

The toponym in question is **Passo di Vicenza**, according to Caracausi (II: 1704) from the name of the town in Veneto, which can be traced to the Latin *Vice(n)tia*. The oral toponym is also *Passu 'i Vicienza*, but in this case the *Namengebung* procedure is made clear by an account given by an informant which betrays the reason for the toponym and reveals its original form:

<p>Vicenza (Passo di) (IGM 259 I N.E.²⁰) Caracausi (II: 1704): from the name of the town in the Veneto region, which derives from the Latin <i>Vice(n)tia</i>.</p>	<p>→ <i>Passu 'i Vicienza</i> Ethnotext: <i>passu: Vicienza è / sulla strada che va a Collesano [...] passî Vicienza: // ieni il confine: / comune di Gratteri e comune di Collesano. cci diciunu passu di Vicienza ma:: / il nome di Vicienza ieni che / allora / i detenuti di Gratteri li portavano a la pretura a Collesano. e cci dicevunu "ti fazzu passari u passu â Vicienza" per dire che / cambiavano comune / dal comune di Gratteri passavano al comune di Collesano.[...] ma::: stu nome ci misuru. passu â Vicienza.</i></p>	<p>Translation: Passo: Vincenza is / on the road that goes to Collesano [...] pass of Vincenza: //it separates:/ Gratteri and Collesano. They call it <i>passu di Vicienza</i> (Vincenza Pass) but::/ the name of <i>Vincenza</i> it's because / once / the prisoners from Gratteri were taken to the police headquarters in Collesano. And they used to tell them "I'll take you over the Pass of the Vincenza" meaning that they would move from the municipality of Gratteri to the municipality of Collesano [...] but::: they gave it this name, <i>Passu â Vicienza</i> Pass of the Vincenza.</p>
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The ethnotext shows an interesting oscillation between *Passu Vicienza* / *Passî Vicienza* (or *Passu di Vicienza*), literally 'the Pass of Vincenza', where *Vicienza* is the feminine form of the name Vincent, and *Passu â Vicienza*, the Pass of the Vincenza', where *â* in Sicilian dialect is the shortened form of 'della', a combination of 'di' meaning 'of' and the feminine singular definite article 'la' which combine to become 'della'. The latter variant is given twice, one instance of which is in a phraseological context and phraseology, as we know, tends to crystallize forms and constructions. This leads us to consider the second form as the original one.

If 'Vicienza' were however a form of the anthroponym 'Vincenza', there would be no article before the name, as in Sicilian, a proper noun is never preceded by the article (a structure which is instead typical of northern Italian dialects). This leads to the hypothesis that 'Vicienza' refers instead to a common noun.

At this point, the ethnotext comes into play as "the prisoners from Gratteri were taken to the police headquarters in Collesano and they used to tell them 'I'll take you over the Pass of the Vincenza' which meant that they would move from the municipality of Gratteri to the

¹⁹ C^{se} is short for *Case* 'houses'.

²⁰ N.E. = northeast.

municipality of Collesano”. It is not clear exactly what the expression ‘*passari u passu â Vicienza*’ given by our informant, with the literal meaning of ‘passing through the Pass of the Vincenza’ in fact means. However, the meaning becomes clearer if it is traced back to the phrase ‘*passari u passu â vicienna*’ where *vicienna* (related to the Italian word ‘vicenda’) can refer either to the changeover process of people taking turns in a particular activity, or to another kind of change, that of a change in circumstances or vicissitude (VS, V: 1078). Evidence of the term, which has now fallen into disuse, is also found in the nineteenth century dictionaries of Biundi (1857), and Traina (1868) and Mortillaro (1876).

It is probable, therefore, that the original toponym in question was *Passu â Vicienna*, with antiphrastic reference, typical of popular irony, to the change-over of the prisoners of Gratteri who were transferred to the police headquarters in Collesano where further ‘changes in their fortune’ clearly awaited them.

Equally as likely, the term *vicienna* whose exact meaning became less clear as the term became less commonly used, was subsequently presumed to derive from anthroponym *Vicienza* ‘Vincenza’ and later misinterpreted in the passage to its official form and reinterpreted as *Passo di Vicenza*, with its somewhat unconvincing reference to the well-known toponym of the Veneto town Vicenza.

Conclusions

As Giovan Battista Pellegrini (*DT* 1990: VII) observes, in toponomastic research “even the most expert and careful specialist must recognize that his analysis [...] cannot always reach unequivocal and definitive results and that he must, frequently, be content with putting forward only good theories”. This paper thus cannot provide the last word on the issues discussed. It is hoped instead that it has succeeded in its intention of showing the importance of a line of research alongside that of “topographic onomastics”:²¹ the observation of oral forms in an emic perspective.

Given that the proper name (of a place) is “a linguistic sign that has the property to signify the *designatum*” (Marcato 2002: 105), the value of this type of sign often lies precisely in its dialect form, which is the expression of a particular world of reference within a specific cultural system.

In the light of what has been discussed in this paper, and considering that an “extraordinarily large number of microtoponyms coincides with pure dialect words belonging to the flora and fauna, or to the anthropization of a given place”, it is thus, as Ruffino (2000: 46) points out, “essential to refer to the lexical system of the area and of the place, which has its specific characteristics” and to consider the names and features of the places given by local speakers.

So the *spoken* toponymy not only may bring to light further toponymic divisions in spaces delimited by physical confines – whether material or merely perceived – integrating the written toponymy with the contribution of unregistered forms, but it “may, in turn, allow the toponyms to speak” (Ruffino 1995:136) and thus show itself to be a valid means of support in etymological and motivational reconstruction processes.

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²¹ Cf. Flechia 1871: 3.

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Elvira Assenza
Messina University
Italy
eassenza@unime.it