

A cognitive semantic analysis of climbing route names

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DOI: 10.2436/15.8040.01.127

Abstract

In connection with our hobbies and related activities new sociolects and new designations are also being created in our modern society. The names of rock climbing routes belong to this relatively new category, too. This extreme sport has a history dating back several centuries.

However, at its beginnings, it was closely related to mountain climbing. The independent, largescale development of sport climbing dates back to the 1960-70-ies. This was the period, in which rock climbing routes and their designations multiplied. The names were/are listed and catalogued in so-called climbing guides by the climbers themselves. Today we find several millions of climbing routes all over the world, and new ones are constantly being created. The climbers' society keeps track of the new routes and their names. In creating these new names, the accepted tradition is that the first climber building up a new route is entitled to name it. The naming process is solely dependent on him or her, therefore an extremely colourful world of names is established. The wide spectrum of variations partly refers to the structure of the names, which range from a single word to almost monologuelike texts. On the other hand, the semantics of these designations also reflect a huge variety, where the more traditional forms of topology, the climbers' emotional, intellectual, socio-cultural world is also conceptualised. This corpus-based study gives insight into the motivations of the designational processes, based on the methods of cognitive semantics, through examples in Hungarian, English, German and Spanish.

1. Introduction

As the results of socioonomastics reveal (cf. Akselberg this volume), sports and hobbies increase the demand for new designations, and tend to give rise to new sociolects. This has been the case with rock climbing too, with route names in particular offering a rich corpus for onomastic research. The extreme sport in question has a history dating back several centuries. However, in the beginning, it was virtually inseparable from mountain climbing, and it was not until the 1960's and '70's that rock climbing truly developed into a sport in its own right. This was the period in which rock climbing routes and their designations multiplied. Ever since that time, the names have been collected and catalogued in so-called climbing guides by the climbers themselves. Today there are several million climbing routes all over the world, and new ones are constantly being created. The climbers' community is eager to keep track of all new routes and their names.

In creating new names, the accepted tradition is that the first climber to conquer a new route is entitled to name it. The naming process is solely dependent on him or her, therefore, as expected, an extremely colourful world of names emerges. There is a wide spectrum of variation in the structure of names, which range from single words to elaborate clauses (short monologues). This is matched by a similar degree of semantic variation, with the topology of the terrain and the climbers' emotional, intellectual, and socio-cultural world contributing the most to conceptualization.

In this paper, I will examine the rich and steadily growing body of climbing route names. My research is based on a corpus of more than 30,000 names, of which 1,200 are Hungarian and the rest includes especially English, German and in a small number French, Italian and Spanish route names collected from 15 climbing areas (see Sources). The focus of my investigation is on characterizing the act of name-giving, and discerning semantic groups or tendencies in the names themselves. The theoretical framework for the semantic analysis is provided by cognitive linguistics. Therefore, after some general remarks on climbing and

climbing routes (2.), I will begin with an overview of proper names as seen from a cognitive perspective, then move on to a general description of climbing route names (3.) and finally give a detailed account of specific names and their motivation by conceptual metaphor (and metonymy) (4.1., 4.2., 4.3.). The last section is reserved for concluding remarks (5.).

2. About climbing and climbing routes in general

Climbing as a sport has its European roots in the Elbe Sandstone Mountains. According to written records, the conquest of Saxon Switzerland began with the first ascent of a peak called Falkenstein in 1864 (Schindler 1996: 5). In the 20th century, but especially from the 50's, climbing entered a new phase with the rapid development of climbing gear and technique. Now there are several hundred thousand official climbing areas and routes in the world, popularized (along with their names and rankings) in climbing guides, on the internet and in specialized magazines (see Fig. 1 and Sources).

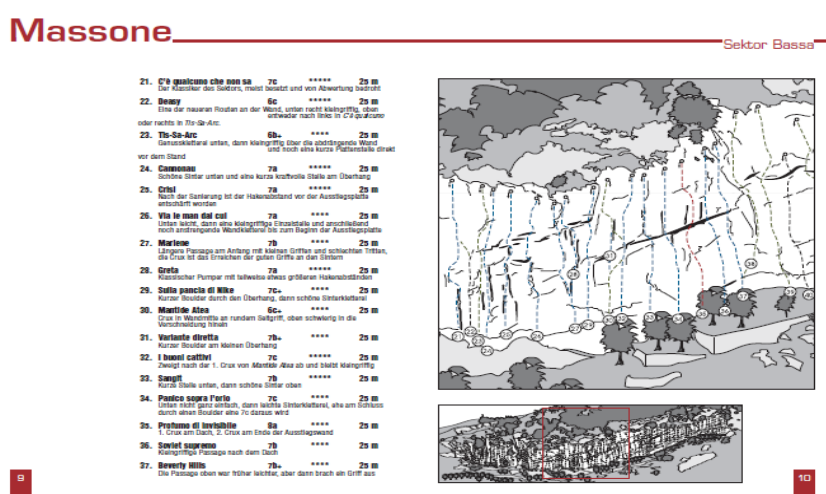


Figure 1: Climbing routes in climbing guide (Meisl-Lochner 2005: 9-10)

3. Proper names from a cognitive perspective – climbing route names

Cognitive linguists assume that language is an integral part of general cognition (rather than an encapsulated module), and that linguistic meaning and conceptualization are strongly intertwined (cf. Langacker 1987, 1991, 2008). Cognitive semantics puts a premium on grounding meaning in human experience. Since language is an integral part of general cognition, meaning is to a large extent motivated by how we perceive, structure, and process the world around us.

Name-giving itself is a cognitive act heavily influenced by the customs and social-interactive practices of the speech community which uses the name. There is of course great variation in proper names depending on what types of entity they refer to, for example, people, institutions, or places. Grammatically speaking, proper names are typically composite structures made up of common nouns, adjectives, and their combinations. This can also be observed in climbing route names (Langacker 2008).

For example:

Sarga fal (Yellow Wall), *Big Blue*, *Diagonalwand* (Diagonal Wall), *Középső út* (Middle Route), *Leicht Alpin* (Easy Alpin), etc.

In the act of name-giving, a variety of factors related to the thing to be named can be profiled (put in the forefront of attention and symbolized linguistically). This gives the process a

fundamentally metonymic character. With respect to climbing routes, note that – in addition to properties of the entity itself – the name-giver, and aspects of the supporting event or situation may also serve as prompts for the name. The background for the name-giving act is the frame of rock climbing which includes the CLIMBER, CLIMBING as an activity (or sport), and the ROUTE with the various features of the terrain (see Fig. 2) (Eysenck–Keane 1990). Furthermore, name-giving is also framed by pragmatic knowledge of how the route names are used in interactions within the climbing community (Kully 1991; Kuna 2006).

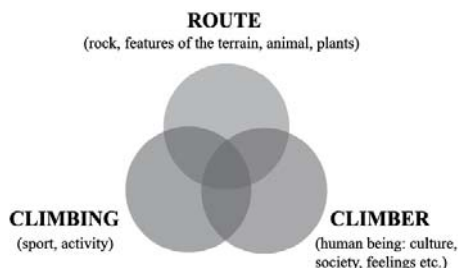


Figure 2: The frame of rock climbing

Climbing in general and route names in particular are closely linked to a hobby/sport practiced by a special social group, which leaves a huge mark on linguistic representations. On the one hand, the function of a route name is to make the route easy to identify and locate. On the other, and this is just as important, conquering a route is almost like a work of art (born when the first ascent is made) and the “author” is often eager to see this encoded in the name. This is why so many names tell stories about the first ascent rather than reflecting properties of the route itself. Another consequence of route names being bound up with a social group is that the names do not have a conventionalized flavour, but rather prioritize the creation of new meaning, making heavy use of originality, puns, and features of the oral register. This is sometimes reflected in the fact that the names describe whole events or situations; that is to say, they express clausal rather than nominal meanings.

For example:

Warum nicht? (Why not?); *Ich will Dich* (I want you); *Porno ist mein Leben* (Porno is my life); *Kleine Menschen brauchen mehr Schlaf* (Small people need more sleep); *Hol vagy Pista?* (Where are you, Pista?); *If I don't do it, somebody else will*; *No Smoke, no Hope*; *Hitch-hike the Plane*; *Shake it Baby*; *Only you complete me*; *No more Babysitting for neurotic girls today*

A further interesting point is that the names may evoke the general social and cultural climate of an era. For example, in the early phase of the sport's history, the names of climbing routes were more similar to other, more standard geographical names (such as those of roads leading to a mountain) than in later decades. Older names tend to profile the form or other characteristic feature of the rock wall, or the direction of the route. Furthermore, they typically assign routes into categories.

For example:

Südwestwand (South-West Wall); *Südkante* (South Edge); *Nagy áthajlás* (Big Overhang); *Balrepedés* (Left Crack); *Diagonalwand* (Diagonal-Wall);

Since the 1950's, the name-giver's personality and imagination have had an ever increasing role in shaping the name-giving process. As a result, new names are less likely to specify categories, and out of context, some of them could hardly be recognized as names in the first place (cf. *postmodern names*, Tolcsvai Nagy 1996).

For example:

Paragraph; *www.scheisse.de* (*www.shit.de*); *Internet*; *Virus*; *Computerspiele* (Computer Games); *Offline*; *New Dimensions*; *Laserkante* (Laser Edge); *Evolution*; *Null Rhesus Positiv*; $E = m \times c^2$

4. The conceptual metaphors associated with route names

From a cognitive linguistic point of view, metaphors and metonymies play a crucial role in human thinking and communication (cf. Kövecses 2002; Lakoff–Johnson 1980; Lakoff–Turner 1989). Mappings between the source and target domains are shaped by both embodied experience and culture, leading to a rich variety of conceptualizations and linguistic representations (cf. Kövecses 2005).

Climbing is a complex activity in which a critical role is played by the rock wall, the characteristics of the route, the plants and animals of the area, and the overall environment of the sport, not to mention the emotions and experiences of the climber (Baukó 2004; Kully 1991; Kuna 2006). These factors all bear on the name-giving process (see Fig. 2), and explain why it relies so much on metonymy and metaphor. In this part of the paper, I will show an illustrative sample of route names, classified according to types of conceptual metonymy or metaphor in the frame of climbing.

4.1. Route

Especially easier routes are often named after the time of the first ascent or the weather in which the “line” was conquered. These expressions are predominantly metonymic, but in many cases simple metonymies give rise to several more complex ones and even metaphors.

TIME/WEATHER FOR ROUTE

Dezemberweg (December Route); *Erster Sonnenstrahl* (The First Sunshine); *Regenweg* (Rainy Route); *Leichte Brise* (Light Breeze); *Immer nass* (Always Wet); *Märzschnee* (March Route); *Osterhase* (Easter Bunny)

Also chiefly metonymical are the names highlighting characteristics of the rock wall or the twists and turns of the route. Another type is based on the metonymic relationship between the route and the plants and animals living alongside it.

PLANT FOR ROUTE

Wand der toten Bäume (Wall of Dead Trees); *Moosweg* (Moss Route); *Akazienweg* (Wattle Route); *Kieferweg* (Pine Route); *Moha és páfrány* (Moss and Fern)

ANIMAL FOR ROUTE/THE ROUTE IS AN ANIMAL;

ANIMAL FOR ROCK WALL/THE ROCK WALL IS AN ANIMAL

Little Mouse; *Gekko*; *Zerge* (Chamois); *Rotfuchs* (Fox); *Elephant's Head*; *Dromedar*; *Pig's Nose*; *Pig's Ear*; *Delphin*; *Salamander*; *Karl der Käfer* (Karl the Beetle)

Talking about animals, popular conceptual metaphors include THE ROCK WALL IS AN ANIMAL and THE CLIMBER IS AN ANIMAL. In the former case, the rock's shape; in the latter, the

climber's movement and stature motivate the mappings. A subcase of the previous metaphor (as well as a metonymic basis for naming the route) is that THE CLIMBER IS A MONKEY (see 4.2.).

In a number of cases, route names evoke connections between the experience of climbing (including its environment) and the climber's personality or lifestyle (see Fig. 2). Based on overlaps between the domains of ROUTE and CLIMBER, routes can be conceptualized as a meal, drink, idea, work of art, a fairy tale or some kind of psychological state or emotion.

THE ROUTE IS A MEAL/DRINK

Kraftbonbon (Power Bonbon); *Nutella*; *Ritter Sport*; *Hot Chile*; *Nie Diät* (Never Diet); *Sektfrühstück* (Champagne for Breakfast); *Pasta Tricolore*; *Espresso*; *Capuccino*; *Kakao mit Sahne* (Hot Chocolate with Whipped Cream); *Big Mac*; *Happy Meal*; *Belegtes Brötchen* (Sandwich)

THE ROUTE IS AN IDEA/PUZZLE

Gleiche Idee (The Same Idea); *Opas Idee* (Grandfather's Idea); *Blitzidee* (Quick Idea); *Zeit zum Lernen* (Time to Learn); *Solution*; *Rätsel ohne Lösung* (Puzzle without Solution)

CLIMBING IS A FAIRY TALE

Abrakadabra; *Hokus Pokus*; *Hexe* (Witch); *Drachenwand* (Dragon's Wall); *Märchenland* (Land of Fairy Tales); *Tales from the Twilight World*; *Diabolo*; *Teufelchen* (Little Devil); *Hölle* (Hell)

THE ROUTE IS A WORK OF ART (MUSIC/FILM/LITERATURE)

Herbstsinfonie (Autumn Symphony); *Herbstsonate* (Autumn Sonata); *Inspiration*; *Meisterwerk* (Artwork); *Jazz, jazz, jazz*; *Pulp fiction*; *Glasperlenspiel* (The Glass Bead Game)

These metaphors are strongly linked to the domain of CLIMBER as a socio-culturally determined human being.

4.2. Climber

Since the act of name-giving is directed at the route, not the climber, metaphorical conceptualizations of the climber generally remain in the background, motivating route names through the CLIMBER FOR ROUTE metonymy. However, it is still worth reiterating that the climber's characteristics (his/her personality, way of movement, or cultural knowledge and experience) feature in several metaphors, THE CLIMBER IS A MONKEY being one such example.

THE CLIMBER IS A MONKEY

Gorilla; *Äffchen* (Little Monkey); *König der Affen* (King of Monkeys); *Affentheater* (Monkey Theatre); *Planet der Affen* (Monkey's Planet); *Monkey Business*

Other mappings indirectly involving the CLIMBER as a person are discussed in this paper under ROUTE (4.1.) or CLIMBING metaphors/metonymies (4.3.).

4.3. Climbing

Climbing as a complex activity is the basis of many conceptual metaphors (motivating route names through the CLIMBING FOR ROUTE metonymy). The mapping may focus on climbing as rhythmic movement and its joy (CLIMBING IS DANCING/HAVING FUN), or, on the contrary, may profile its painful and psychologically straining aspects. The latter is especially frequent with

more difficult routes (CLIMBING IS TORTURE, CLIMBING IS AN ILLNESS, CLIMBING IS ENDURANCE/THE USE OF POWER).

CLIMBING IS DANCING/HAVING FUN

Technischer Tanz (Technical Dance); *Der letzte Tanz* (The last Dance); *Tanz der Vampire* (Vampire's Dance); *Tango Korrupti*; *Ballerina*; *Private Dancer*; *Samba Party*; *Tabledance*; *Dancefloor*; *The Dance alone*; *Schwesterlein, komm tanz mit mir* (Little Sister, come and dance with me); *Dance to heaven*; *Tango mit dem Tod* (Tango with the Death); *Dances with Wolves*

CLIMBING IS ENDURANCE/THE USE OF POWER

Power-action; *Null Power*; *Free Fight*; *Fight for your Right*; *Kraftmeister* (Power Master); *Power Göttin* (Power Goddess)

CLIMBING IS TORTURE, CLIMBING IS AN ILLNESS

Sebstmord (Suicide); *Fingertöter* (Finger Killer); *21 times the pain*; *Broken Nose*; *Pain makes me stronger, every day!*; *Psychoterapie*; *Disaster*; *Malaria*; *Terror*; *Daily Terror*; *Anarchia*; *Diktatur* (Dictatorship)

Both literally and metaphorically, climbing means going all the way to the end, so it is not surprising that CLIMBING IS A JOURNEY is a widely attested metaphor, along with its more specific version, CLIMBING IS FLYING, with both physical and emotional connotations.

CLIMBING IS A JOURNEY

Reise nach Indien (Journey to India); *Armins letzte Reise* (Armin's last Journey); *Reise nach Jerusalem* (Journey to Jerusalem); *Road to Tibet*; *Long Road to Ruin*; *Peterchens Mondfahrt* (Little Peter's Moon Journey); *Hochzeitsreise* (Honey Moon); *Final Destination*; *Höllenfahrt* (Journey to the Hell); *Himmelfahrt* (Journey to the Sky)

CLIMBING IS FLYING/FALLING

Flying Horse; *Ikarus*; *Nur Fliegen ist schöner* (Only Flying is nicer); *Catch me, if I'm falling*; *Fight Gravity*; *Feuervogel* (Fire Bird); *Velcro Fly*; *Vertigo*; *Antigravitation*; *High Gravity Day*

A sense of height, emotional elevation, and flying may further translate into spiritual experience, which accounts for the high number of metaphors of transcendence. These are typically variations on two themes, CLIMBING IS SALVATION/HEAVEN and CLIMBING IS SINFULNESS/HELL. In conclusion, climbing is strongly attached to two extremes: it can be conceptualized as joy, satisfaction, and a welcome challenge (a sense of elevation – UP) but also as torture, fear and terror (a sense of falling – DOWN). These emotions tend to be represented in the names as well.

5. Concluding remarks

In this paper, I hope to have shown how the frame of climbing with its three domains (ROUTE, CLIMBING, CLIMBER) inspires and constrains the act of name-giving. As the examples demonstrate, emotions, creativity and puns play a significant role in the process, motivated by the freedom of name-givers in inventing new names and the “work of art” character of the first ascent. As a result, the names do not have a conventional flavour but rather make a vivid impression, highlighting their status as part of the jargon of a social group. The specification of a route's category in the name is increasingly uncommon, with this and many other factors

also depending on the social and cultural climate of the era. In future research, it will be interesting to examine how the names are used between climbers in discourse. Another promising avenue to explore would be to analyse UP – DOWN metaphors and their correlation with route difficulty; or to compare climbing route names to the names of mountains, weighing up similarities and differences in their meaning and use.

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