

The Great Silk Road As A Historical And Cultural Space And The Semantics Of Its Dromonyms

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Abstract. The article examines the Great Silk Road as an integrated historical and cultural space that connected the peoples of Eurasia for more than a millennium. The main object of the study is the proper names of roads, caravan routes, and trade networks, namely dromonyms. Using descriptive, semantic, comparative-onomastic, and historical-linguistic methods, dromonyms are classified according to their semantic features into geographical, functional-trade, ethnocultural, sacred, and complex groups. Their nominative, directional, informative, cultural-historical, and symbolic functions are identified. Toponyms containing the components *rabot*, *guzar*, and *darband* in the territory of Uzbekistan are also interpreted within this classification. The results demonstrate that dromonyms constitute a distinctive linguistic archive preserving traces of population movements, trade relations, and religious practices. Furthermore, it is substantiated that the name “Great Silk Road” itself is a generalizing dromonym created in a later period.

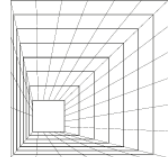
Keywords. Great Silk Road, historical and cultural space, dromonym, toponymy, onomastics, semantic classification, nomination, calquing, phonetic adaptation, cultural exchange, historical memory.

Introduction. The Great Silk Road is a unique historical and cultural phenomenon that connected the regions of Eastern, Central, and Western Eurasia for more than a millennium. This network linked geographically distant regions and facilitated the exchange of material goods, technologies, ideas, and cultural practices. Modern transport systems primarily serve economic or administrative purposes. The Silk Road, however, simultaneously functioned as a social and political, cultural, and religious space. It was precisely within this space that stable forms of interaction between different peoples and civilizations were established.

It should also be noted that the term “Silk Road” itself emerged relatively late. According to V. Hansen, this name was introduced into scholarly usage in the 1870s by the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen to designate the trade routes between China and the West [1]. Later, it became a generalizing name for the entire trans-Eurasian communication system. This fact demonstrates that road names not only reflect historical reality but also reinterpret it from the perspective of a particular period.

The Great Silk Road was not a single linear route. Researchers describe it as a complex network of overland and partially maritime routes that passed through deserts, mountain passes, oases, river valleys, and major trade centers [1, 2]. The distinctive features of each network were determined by the natural and geographical conditions, the economic potential of the region, cultural traditions, and the political situation. P. Frankopan regards the Silk Roads as the central axis of world history and particularly emphasizes that religions, languages, and technologies spread along them [2]. V. V. Bartold reconstructed, on the basis of written sources, the condition of the cities of Transoxiana and the trade routes of Turkestan on the eve of the Mongol invasion [3]. Therefore, the Silk Road should be viewed not merely as trade infrastructure, but as a dynamic space where different languages, ethnic groups, and religious communities intersected, influenced one another, and underwent continuous transformation.

In studying such a space, toponyms, particularly dromonyms, are of particular importance. In onomastic terminology, a dromonym refers to the proper name of any communication route [4]. Dromonyms are not limited to recording the geographical characteristics of a place. They also preserve the cultural and historical conditions of the period in which a name emerged. In this sense, dromonyms can be regarded as a distinctive linguistic layer providing information about population



movements, trade relations, religious practices, and even the political affiliation of territories. Some road names contain ethnonyms indicating the ethnic composition of the population. Other names point to the economic function of a route. Yet another group reflects routes leading to pilgrimage sites and the paths through which religious cults spread.

Studying the toponymic space of the Silk Road makes it possible to observe the interrelationship of the natural, economic, and cultural factors that shaped its structure. The geographical location of a route often determined its strategic and economic value. Cultural and religious factors, in turn, contributed to the establishment of a route in the collective consciousness of the population and to its recording in language as a name. Dromonyms make it possible to trace the history of the development of territories, identify processes of cultural adaptation and assimilation, and reconstruct the structure of interregional contacts. These names are also a valuable source for linguists, as they clearly reveal processes of phonetic adaptation, calquing, and semantic change. Toponymic data also contribute to the reconstruction of interregional contacts that are not sufficiently reflected in written sources [5].

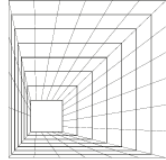
The aim of this article is to characterize the Great Silk Road as an integrated historical and cultural space, classify the dromonyms formed within this space according to their semantic features, and determine their functions. To this end, the study sets out to identify the factors that influenced the formation of dromonyms, distinguish their semantic groups, determine their functions, and interpret the toponyms associated with routes in the territory of Uzbekistan within the framework of this classification.

Literature Review and Methodology. The theory of proper names has been thoroughly developed in Russian onomastics. A. V. Superanskaya developed a general theory of proper names, classified onyms according to the type of object being named, and identified internal groups of toponyms [6]. In N. V. Podolskaya's dictionary of onomastic terms, the term *dromonym* is clearly defined and incorporated into a system alongside other types of toponyms [4]. V. A. Nikonov considered the toponym as a historical source and emphasized the necessity of studying a name not in isolation, but within a series of similar names [5]. E. L. Berezovich substantiated an ethnolinguistic approach to toponymy and demonstrated that place names reflect a people's perceptions of the world [7]. A. K. Matveev, in turn, interpreted onomatology as an independent discipline and substantiated the role of proper names as evidence for the history of a language [8].

In Uzbek toponymy, the theoretical works of S. Qorayev occupy an important place in the classification of Uzbek place names and the identification of their historical layers [9]. T. Nafasov's explanatory dictionary contains extensive material on the meanings and origins of toponyms in Uzbekistan [10]. Nevertheless, in Uzbek onomastics, road names have been studied less extensively than oikonoms and hydronyms. The works of V. V. Bartold, V. Hansen, and P. Frankopan on the historical geography of the Silk Road serve as the main sources [1, 2, 3]. Hansen presents the Silk Road as a set of local routes that were constantly changing, whereas Frankopan places particular emphasis on its role as a global connecting network. These two perspectives are also important for the interpretation of dromonyms.

Our material consists of dromonyms of the Great Silk Road network and the Eurasian routes connected to it, as well as toponyms associated with roads in the territory of Uzbekistan. The material was collected from the historical and geographical works, onomastic dictionaries, and toponymic studies mentioned above. The analysis employed the descriptive method, semantic analysis aimed at identifying the motivation for naming, the comparative-onomastic method, and historical-linguistic (etymological) analysis. The interpretation of the names was based on data from historical geography, cultural studies, and ethnography. Such an interdisciplinary approach makes it possible to view roads not merely as physical communication arteries, but as phenomena that carry ethnic, religious, economic, and symbolic information.

Results. The analysis showed that dromonyms constitute a distinct category within toponyms. They name roads, caravan routes, and trade arteries that played an important role in the development



of territories and the formation of interregional communication networks. The emergence of dromonyms is influenced by natural and geographical factors such as relief, climatic conditions, water sources, and the presence of oases. Alongside these factors, the economic and cultural functions of a route are also reflected in its name. Each dromonym preserves certain information about the route's position in space, its function, the ethnic groups associated with it, and the cultural practices of the population.

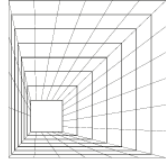
Because the routes of the Silk Road were subject to change, numerous dromonyms emerged. A single section of a route could be referred to by different names depending on the ethnocultural environment, economic function, or period during which the route was active. Based on their semantic features, the dromonyms of the Silk Road and the routes connected to it can be divided into five groups (see Table 1).

Table 1.
Semantic Groups of Dromonyms

Group	Naming Motivation	Examples
Geographical	Natural and geographical characteristics, relief, and location of the route	Hexi Corridor (Chinese “west of the river”), northern and southern routes of the Tian Shan
Functional-trade	Goods transported along the route and the commercial function of the route	Silk Road, Spice Route, Tea and Horse Road, Amber Road
Ethnocultural	Ethnic affiliation of the population inhabiting the territory through which the route passed	“Route from the Varangians to the Greeks”, Nogai Road (Bashkortostan)
Sacred	Pilgrimage route, religious value, or the name of a saint	Darb al-Hajj (Arabic “pilgrimage road”), Camino de Santiago
Complex	Combination of several semantic features	Darb Zubayda (a personal name and a pilgrimage route), Via Francigena (ethnonym and pilgrimage route)

The first group consists of geographical dromonyms. They record the physical characteristics of a route and its natural environment. For example, the name Hexi Corridor in Chinese sources refers to the narrow corridor to the west of the Yellow River and is based on geographical location. The designation of the routes passing along the two edges of the Taklamakan Desert as the northern and southern routes in relation to the Tian Shan also belongs to this type. The second group consists of functional-trade dromonyms. They reflect the economic role of a route and the direction of commodity exchange. Such names include the Silk Road, the Spice Route, and the Tea and Horse Road, along which tea was transported from Yunnan and Sichuan to Tibet in exchange for horses. The Amber Road, along which amber was transported from the Baltic region to the Mediterranean, is also important for comparison.

The third group consists of ethnocultural dromonyms. They contain an ethnonym or an element referring to the cultural and historical environment of a region. The name “Route from the Varangians to the Greeks”, recorded in an ancient Russian chronicle, is a vivid example of this type. One of the historical routes and territories of Bashkortostan was known as the Nogai Road. The fourth group consists of sacred dromonyms. They record routes of religious significance, pilgrimage movements, and the spread of religious practices. The name Darb al-Hajj, meaning “pilgrimage road” in the Arab world, and the Camino de Santiago in Europe belong to this group. The fifth group consists of complex dromonyms, in which several semantic features are combined. The pilgrimage



route from Kufa to Mecca was called Darb Zubayda after Zubayda, the wife of Harun al-Rashid. This name simultaneously expresses a personal name, a sacred function, and state patronage. In the name Via Francigena, an ethnonym is combined with a pilgrimage route.

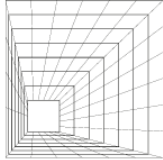
The analysis also showed that dromonyms perform functions that extend beyond simply designating a route. First, they perform a nominative function, that is, they establish the route in language and distinguish it from other routes. Second, the directional function serves to provide spatial orientation and determine the direction of movement. Third, the informative function conveys information about the natural conditions, economic relations, and cultural characteristics of the territory through which the route passed. Fourth, the cultural-historical function records historical events, population movements, and changes in the structure of routes. Finally, the symbolic function reflects the values, religious beliefs, and worldview of the communities that used these routes.

It should also be noted that the system of dromonyms was subject to change. A single section of a route could be known by different names in different periods and in the languages of different peoples. On the one hand, a route could be named according to the city to which it led. On the other hand, the goods transported along the route, the ethnic group that guarded or used the route, or a pilgrimage site located along the route could also serve as naming motivations. Therefore, when studying dromonyms, it is important to determine the language to which a name belongs, when it was recorded, and by whom it was used. For example, a route mentioned in one source as a trade route may be described in another source as a military campaign route or a pilgrimage route. Natural and geographical factors, such as mountain passes, deserts, and oases, also had a significant influence on names. Narrow gorges, crossings, and water sources that were crucial for travel along the Silk Road became established in the consciousness of local populations as distinctive landmarks and subsequently developed into permanent names.

In the territory of Uzbekistan, the dromonymic layer associated with the Silk Road has been preserved mainly in the names of caravan stations, crossings, and mountain passes. The component *rabot*, derived from the Arabic word *ribāt*, initially denoted a border fortress and later came to mean a station where caravans stopped. This component has been preserved in the name of Qoshrobot District in Samarkand Region [10]. The Persian word *guzar* means a passage or crossing and is associated with the name G'uzor in Kashkadarya Region. The component *darband* consists of the Persian elements *dar* ("door") and *band* ("barrier") and denotes a narrow passage in a mountain gorge. The gorge near the village of Darband in Surkhandarya Region was historically known as the Iron Gate. In the 7th century, the Chinese monk Xuanzang passed along this route on his journey to India and recorded it as the Iron Gate [1]. Arab geographers also referred to this place by the name *Bab al-Hadid*, meaning "Iron Door".

Discussion. The findings confirm that dromonyms constitute a boundary category between physical-geographical and social toponyms in onomastics. They record natural landmarks while also reflecting the dynamics of economic and cultural activity, population movements, changes in routes, and the spread of religious, political, and trade practices. The semantic structure of a dromonym is generally multilayered. Elements of geographical location, functional purpose, and ethnocultural affiliation may occur simultaneously within it. Therefore, the groups presented in Table 1 do not have strictly defined boundaries. Many names can simultaneously be assigned to two groups, which also accounts for the distinction of the complex group.

The difference between the views of Hansen and Frankopan is also important for the interpretation of dromonyms. As Hansen emphasizes, the merchants and travelers who moved along the routes did not know the name "Silk Road"; they referred to individual sections of the routes according to local landmarks and destinations [1]. Thus, the name "Great Silk Road" is a retrospective, scholarly, and to some extent symbolic dromonym. Beneath this generalizing name lie the original names of each route, formed in local languages. Frankopan's idea of global interconnectedness explains why this generalizing name has become so firmly established in modern cultural consciousness [2]. In our view, these two layers should be distinguished when studying



dromonyms. The first consists of local names used by participants of the routes during the historical period, while the second consists of generalizing names created by scholars and society in later periods.

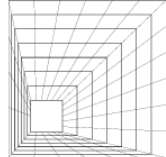
Several historical-linguistic processes can be observed in the formation and use of dromonyms. In calquing, a name or its semantic structure is translated from one language into another. The German name *Seidenstraße* used by Richthofen and its Russian form “Шёлковый путь” and Uzbek form “Ipak yo‘li” provide examples of this process. In phonetic adaptation, a borrowed name is adapted to the phonetic norms of the recipient language. The Russian form *Derbent* of the Persian name *Darband* is a product of such a process. The process of borrowing, in turn, directly reflects intercultural contacts, as exemplified by the incorporation of the Arabic *ribāt* into Uzbek toponymy. The example of the Iron Gate is particularly instructive. A single mountain passage was designated in Persian, Chinese, Arabic, and Turkic languages by names with nearly identical internal forms. This demonstrates how important points along the Silk Road were named in a multilingual environment.

The reflection of political power in road names is also noteworthy. During the Achaemenid period, the road extending from the city of Susa to Sardis in Asia Minor and described by Herodotus became known in historiography as the Royal Road. This name reflects the state importance of the road, the postal and messenger service, and the role of central authority in administering territories. Such names may also be referred to as socio-political dromonyms. In the classification presented above, they are close to the complex group, as they combine geographical direction, administrative function, and the symbol of authority. In the history of the Silk Road, changes in states also influenced the significance and naming of routes. A route that was busy during the reign of one dynasty could be abandoned in another period, while its name might survive only in written sources or individual place names. The system of Turkestan routes on the eve of the Mongol invasion described by V. V. Bartold can serve as an example of this [3]. In this respect, dromonyms also function as layers that help distinguish historical periods from one another.

Dromonyms also perform a sociocultural function. They are markers of historical memory that record the development of territories and changes in routes during different historical periods. A change in a route name may reflect a change in political power, a change in the route itself, or large-scale population movements. In this sense, it is appropriate to regard dromonyms as linguistic archives in which important events and processes are recorded. The cultural significance of the Silk Road was manifested in its role in shaping ethnic and religious identities and in disseminating writing systems, languages, and traditions. Dromonyms recorded these processes and became markers of cultural memory.

The interdisciplinary study of dromonyms demonstrates that they are valuable not only for linguistics but also for history, cultural studies, ethnography, and historical geography. Dromonyms can be used to reconstruct trade routes, identify migration patterns, determine the extent of cultural interaction, and assess the degree to which regions were integrated into the trans-Eurasian communication network. At the same time, the limitations of the study should also be noted. Many local road names from the Middle Ages have not survived to the present day or have been preserved only fragmentarily in the works of Arab geographers and Chinese chronicles. Therefore, further research should expand the corpus of dromonyms on the basis of written sources, compare regional data, and incorporate materials from field toponymic studies.

Conclusion. The Great Silk Road is a unique historical and cultural space in which economic, social, cultural, and religious processes interacted. The analysis of dromonyms as a distinct category of toponyms demonstrated that road names not only record physical and geographical characteristics but also reflect cultural and historical events, population movements, trade relations, and religious practices. The semantic multilayeredness of dromonyms made it possible to classify them into geographical, functional-trade, ethnocultural, sacred, and complex groups. These names perform nominative, directional, informative, cultural-historical, and symbolic functions.



The study demonstrated that the name “Great Silk Road” itself is a retrospective and generalizing dromonym, beneath which lie the names of individual routes formed in local languages. Names containing the components *rabot*, *guzar*, and *darband* in Uzbek toponymy preserve the memory of the caravan stations, crossings, and mountain passes of the Silk Road. The example of the Iron Gate clearly demonstrates the naming of a single route point in different languages through calquing.

The study of dromonyms contributes to the reconstruction of communication networks, the identification of patterns of cultural exchange, and the tracing of the integration of different regions into the trans-Eurasian system. Further research should focus on expanding the corpus of dromonyms, comparing regional data, and conducting a deeper semantic and historical-linguistic analysis of road names.

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