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The Wonderful World of Geographic Names: Things Learned and Things Yet To Be Learned

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Abstract

During thirty years as Executive Secretary of the Board on Geographic Names I had many learning experiences: team work by geographers and descriptive linguists broke new ground at this disciplinary interface; resolution of controversial Antarctic name problems demonstrated the practicability of international cooperation; systematic processing of millions of foreign and domestic names made possible many generalizations about name giving and using; mapping the occurrence of all generic terms in names on Geological Survey maps and coast charts published through 1958 gave new insights into the numbers, distribution, and varied application of terms.

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What is so wonderful about geographic names? How have they led me and my colleagues over nearly a half century to wonder, to get excited by new understandings and by unanticipated challenging problems? How have they led us to muster sufficient intellectual humility to open some mental windows and let us view more objectively our own onomastic behavior? Let's go back and look at some few selected events and their learning consequences during my time with the US Board on Geographic Names (BGN).

Before I was old enough to go to school to learn to read and write, I learned the concept of being "cumpstable" and how to talk about it. Then one day my family gently but firmly informed me that there was no such word as *cumpstable*—the word was *com-fort-able*. I was stunned. I would have none of it. I reminded them that they as well as I said cumpstable! I HEARD them! They denied it. I felt betrayed. How could my own family do this to me! To this day I remember the scene of my trauma, our kitchen, the family gathered around, and my shattered confidence in them and myself. Little did I realize then that my preparation for a career in geographic name standardization had just begun. I had learned that ear recognition of words can differ from

eye recognition, that communication requires agreement by people on the significance of sounds and symbols, and that people resist giving up an idea really mentally set. Of course I had to learn these things all over again, as you will note, but the next time wasn't traumatic, it was stimulating. It still is.

War is hell, to be sure, but the motive of survival may call for extraordinary activities unsupportable in peacetime. In 1943 war maps and charts needed two and a half million Chinese names converted into roman letters, ninety percent of them for the first time. The armed services couldn't agree on how to do it. There was no precedent, and none of the services had authority over the others. However, Interior Secretary Harold Ickes had authority, and there was a BGN, so the problem was laid in Ickes' lap with a blank check and two years to solve it. He found he had a geographer in the Department and laid his problem in my lap.

About all that Ickes knew about geographic names was that naming for living persons was unwise. He especially had strong feelings that it would be particularly unwise for Boulder Dam to be named for Herbert Hoover, but he knew how to support a program and did it. I didn't know all that much more about names than Ickes, but I got taught fast. Time was a-wasting. A procedure had to be agreed upon. A long all-day meeting of all federal agencies concerned with the problem or knowledgeable about Chinese settled the basic program elements. Next day the Hydrographic Office raised objections, challenging the proposed romanization system. Their problem turned out to be that they didn't see how they could re-engrave their copper plates fast enough. Told that they could do revisions on paper pulls from the plates, agreement was promptly restored. We had had the first of many challenges and the first of many lessons on constraints posed by equipment, machinery, and vested interests.

We saw quickly that since we would be breaking new ground at the interface of geography and language, we had to have on the staff some top-flight descriptive linguists, not polyglots but experts on the structure and workings of languages. Yale professor George Trager joined us promptly; others followed. BGN is unique in having had scientific linguists and geographers working together for almost fifty years, on a huge and varied corpus of names from all over the world. The team enabled the BGN to withstand early challenges and to initiate international cooperation on many fronts. The linguists learned to do practical problem solving

and the geographers learned astonishing things about their own behavior in manipulating language.

The linguists taught us that reluctance to believe something different from what we already believed (let us call it mental set) is normal behavior below the conscious level in matters linguistic and gave us some examples from language, starting with the relation of mental set to the sound system of a language. Out of the myriads of noises that human vocal systems can produce, only a few form the stock of sounds for a given language, and no two languages have identical stocks. All sounds not in the stock are non-significant "noise," to be disregarded. Children learn to make the stock sounds and ignore the others at an early age.

Once an individual masters the sound system, and as long as he remains linguistically naive, he normally experiences difficulty in making any other sounds in speech. Not only does he resist making other sounds, he often does not receive them, having learned to ignore them as irrelevant noise. The language also has a finite set of permissible sound sequences that are learned along with the sounds themselves. The naive speaker will regard any other sequence as unpronounceable, and will either balk at a non-permitted sequence, or will add, drop, or modify sounds to make the sequence fit the system. For example, in our own system, since we may not start a word with *ng*, when we are confronted with a word like *ngola*, we do something to make it pronounceable, such as prefixing a vowel to alter the word to, say, *angola*.[2]

Within days after the start of the Chinese project, a challenge came in connection with impending publication of the nautical chart of the Antarctic, full of names of living sponsors of expeditions, both American and foreign. The Board had sat on the problem for a year, not knowing how to deal with Ickes. The Hydrographic Office decided to wait no longer. To take care of the living names question, they put Ickes' name on a mountain range and Roosevelt's name on a sea. It didn't work. Ickes made them take his name off before they released the chart. A special committee quickly found in a Norwegian language publication that Norway had already named the sea for Amundsen. An exchange of pleasantries between the Secretaries of Navy and Interior did not resolve the matter, which was sent to President Roosevelt for decision. He replied that of course Amundsen's name should be used, that a piece of frozen ocean was not appropriate for him, anyway! If the President hadn't known about BGN before, he did now. Ickes had had good practice defending the program and had learned that the non-living-

names policy couldn't apply in Antarctica. BGN had launched into unraveling the tangled history of Antarctic naming and had to have a tenable policy.

Information on Antarctica was scarce, fragmentary, often conflicting. Sealers had kept their knowledge to themselves, and for a long time American explorers did not make maps on their return. In some cases important features named by one expedition could not be found by other expeditions where reported. Most of the continent had yet to be seen. Explorers had put names of important persons on unimportant features seen early in their expeditions. A broad policy framework was drawn up in cooperation with explorers, published, widely adopted internationally, and applied. For each name it decided, BGN cited all the evidence it had on who named what, where, and why, with a promise to reconsider if anyone else had better evidence. It kept the promise. Adversaries promptly were converted to cooperators. After that, the US and Britain worked out most Antarctic naming problems informally before either took official action from which it would be awkward to retreat. They still do. As BGN's files grew, foreign explorers increasingly sought and gave help. In less than two decades the then existing Antarctic names had become essentially standardized internationally, and a procedure was in place for assimilating new naming. From this experience BGN learned that international standardization is both feasible and indispensable.

After the Chinese program was launched in early 1943, an inventory of domestic name decisions in the 1934 Sixth Report told us how many of what kinds of entities had been covered by decisions. In the process we found a number of *towheads*; their nature was unclear, and we didn't look in an unabridged dictionary. We did not know what to do with them until a new staff member from Missouri, Al Belden, identified them as river islands with cottonwoods. Rivermen needed names for them; they were dangerous; they didn't stay put; they migrated upstream as sediment accumulated on the upstream end and was washed away from the downstream end. This was the first of many encounters with unfamiliar generic terms in domestic names.

One day one of the Board brought me an example of an unusual generic term, *mirth*, in the name *Cienaga Mirth*. It turned out that *mirth* wasn't the generic; it was the specific term and *cienaga* was the generic. This started a collection of "rare" generics. After I had enough examples to attempt to generalize, I had to conclude that they were not rare, just regionalisms. So I tried mapping the occurrence of some

regionalisms starting from a known location and working outward. One of the terms was *towhead.* Its "region" turned out to be the Mississippi and lower Ohio rivers. Other terms kept turning up far outside the starting "region." Finally I started collecting all the generics from all the topographic maps and plotting their occurrence on US base maps, starting in the northeast corner of Maine, my native state. Surprises came thick and fast.

Hope, folly, and *gurnet* appeared to be generics. They are. *Hope* and *folly* are included in dictionaries, and though *gurnet* is not, a man who lived beside a named gurnet explained that it is a tidal channel too swift to navigate except when the tide is right. Other terms were not recognized as generics on first encounter and had to be picked up later after repeated occurrences and sometimes published definitions established that at least to some people at some time, they are or were generics.

I used to wonder why my grandfather's chickens, when they found a particularly choice tidbit, would not quietly enjoy it but would go rushing around the barnyard showing it off. I found myself doing the same thing. I did the generics study at home, on nights and weekends, and could hardly wait to get to the office to share my discoveries. I probably cackled and flapped my wings. Sometimes my colleagues had trouble believing me, which I found interesting.

Some maps that did not have a particular term as a generic had it as a specific. That was recorded to show areal distribution better. This brought out that practically all of the generics also were surnames of people, e.g. *hill, wood, dale.* Even *mountain, creek, prairie, town,* and *village* are surnames of people in the District of Columbia telephone book. Occurrence as a specific in placenames indicates that at least the word is known there, but it doesn't tell us whether, say, Marsh Creek got its name from associated wetlands or from a person named *Marsh.*

Some wonderful aspects of generics are their sheer numbers, the variety of entities called by the same term, and the variety of terms for the same entity. My list totalled more than 2,000 different terms. Everyone who saw the list knew fewer than half of the terms and disagreed with some other people on just what some terms meant.

There are, in the US, named bogans, pokelokens, tumps, half-falls, motts, heaths, deadwaters, rincons, low gaps, balds, thrumcaps, vleis, pocosins, horsebacks, hogbacks, lomas, etc., etc. There are meadows that are good fishing places, highways that are water channels, bayous with a slope of 250 feet to the mile, glades that are streams or wetlands

or bare rock, etc., etc. Nearly all generics were applied to entities that I would put in different categories. For example: Donner Pass is in the Sierras, Pass a Loutre is a Mississippi delta distributary, and Passa a Grille is a strait between Florida islands. I did not have a category for places of repeated action. The namers obviously did.

Two concepts, topocomplex and bedeutungsfeld, contributed to BGN understanding of toponyms and to two practical problems of standardization: "identification," deciding just what the entity is that a name applies to, and "designation," selecting the single word that will best describe it.

A topocomplex is a geographic entity of topographic scale made up of more than one discrete and separably namable element but identifiable by a single term or toponym. *Pemaquid Point*, in Maine, refers both to a peninsula some six miles long and to its tip. *Peak* often refers both to a mountain and to its pointed top. These are combinations of a protruding mass and its extremity. There are other combinations. Bedeutungsfeld is the field or range of meaning of a word or term, a concept developed by German linguists. BGN adopted it and explored its applicability to toponomy and geographic terminology.

We all know that words commonly have more than one meaning and we know that this is true of toponymic terms. *Bay* means one thing in the case of Chesapeake Bay and something else in the case of the Carolina bays. Then we found that common toponymic terms have great variation in meaning for different people and that some terms have a much wider bedeutungsfeld than others. Wider bedeutungsfeld means greater ambiguity and less effectiveness as a designator term.

Benjamin Whorf has pointed out that "...the meanings of specific words are less important than we fondly fancy, and that we all are mistaken in our common belief that any word has an exact meaning. Sentences, not words, are the essence of speech, just as equations and functions, and not bare names, are the real meat of mathematics" (258).

Much is known about the ways in which bedeutungsfeld develops, but apparently little had been done before in this connection with toponymic terms. Some processes that have not been described before as far as I know are gradually being uncovered by experimenting and theorizing. In a paper read in 1954,[3] subsequently published in this journal, I reported that I had noticed mental set on my part, with reference to terms and meanings, that subsequently I had noted it in others, and that this might eventually shed some light on processes. It has. Discovery that mental set with reference

to terms and meanings is apparently universal and akin to mental set in other aspects of language was followed by a more or less sophisticated attitude toward it. This has permitted us to look with some measure of objectivity at our own mental processes relating to terminology, to entertain some new ideas that previously we might have rejected, and to ask ourselves meaningful questions.

Some of the processes that we tentatively identified seem to occur also in other parts of the world, even in places with quite unrelated languages, leading us to believe that there may be a whole body of toponymic principles that transcend even families of individual languages and approach the universality of language itself.

Most terms have a wider bedeutungsfeld than individuals know. For example, few know that *creek* can mean a narrow strip of land. We found many unfamiliar connotations by comparing definitions from a large number of glossaries and dictionaries, some quite illuminating. More important to the immediate problems of identification and designation, however, was that terms have a different bedeutungsfeld for each individual.

We learned to be cautious with interlanguage dictionaries, for example, Hungarian to English, that give one-word equivalents. If an English equivalent is, say, *meadow*, we don't know what kind of meadow the author or compiler had in mind.

Semantics can be a problem, especially when communicators come from more than one culture. At the first UN Group of Experts meeting in 1960, the first half day was spent agreeing on terms such as *transcription* and *transliteration* and the meanings we would attach to them for purposes of the meeting. At the ensuing full-scale conference all of those definitions were reviewed. Only two were modified. The others were agreed to when the meanings of the words suggested for change could not be agreed to.

We learned to look at geographic names in terms of both group and individual human behavior. As an example of group behavior, earth scientists and laymen tend to name things differently. The scientists tend to categorize natural features on the basis of genesis, the laymen on the basis of relation to human activities or appearance.

As we moved around the world in the gazetteer program and the name files began to take on menacing size, we asked ourselves "how big a tiger are we trying to ride?" To get some kind of figure, we made counts of names on maps at varying scales in areas of different name density and then we extrapolated. We concluded that the number of entities with

geographic names then in use was at least as large as the world's population, then thought to be about three billion. Obviously, we learned, cooperation by many people and countries over a long time was in order. BGN is still recruiting cooperators.

We came to see that it is normal behavior to regard our categories as things that always existed, independent of human invention, when of course they are constructs, devices for ordering knowledge. Such an attitude as we had impedes acceptance of other peoples' categories at variance with ours.

Staff members, for example, disagreed angrily on whether a particular group of islands qualified as an archipelago. Some held that the islands had to be arranged in a certain way; others held for a different arrangement; still others thought arrangement irrelevant. None recognized the Greek elements of the word, which translate as "great or chief sea." None was aware that in most dictionaries the first definition is "a body of water studded with islands."

In deciding how to distinguish swamps from marshes and other wetlands, we found that people differ as to whether a swamp has to have trees to qualify. In answer to queries, I have had brothers, life-long friends, and husbands and wives give me opposite answers and then look incredulously at one another. How can people who are in close contact for a long time hold opposite views, and not realize it?

We think that people get their connotations of geographic terms, starting at an early age, by observing what authorities call things in real life or in pictures. The authorities may be parents, other older people, contemporaries who seem to know, teachers, authors, perhaps almost anyone on television. Observing is followed or accompanied by visualization of an archetype such as Niagara for a falls. Once a meaning based on such an archetype is adopted and reinforced, mental set prevents it from being readily given up. This would explain why, in the case of archipelago, some insisted on a certain arrangement.

In communication involving geographic terms, if you can see what is referred to there is little confusion about what is meant. If the referent is not in view, you simply assume that other people share your understanding of the term. So the brothers and others never realized that they differed on whether swamps must have trees.

In a process of early fixation of archetypes such as described, the connotations are acquired as a sort of revealed truth rather than by reasoning. This also happens with religious and political beliefs. In such

cases, when your mentally set ideas are subject to rational attack and you have no rational defense, you're frustrated and behave with typical frustration anger.

Some things we have yet to learn. There are many relatively small additions to our collective knowledge that I'd like to see attempted. One is, what is the relation between mispronunciation and comprehension? Another is a comparative study of populated place name-change sequences in the US. Still another relates to why people react, with reference to names, sometimes emotionally, sometimes rationally. Up to now it has not been easy to see enough names to generalize; with the BGN computer data base, now it is. Everyone has a personal stock of generic terms known from experience and not exactly like any other person's; how big and how different are they?

We have found many concepts that appear to approach universality and others that at least cross language boundaries, like designation of springs by the word for the organ of sight in English, Spanish, Arabic, Turkish, and Scandinavian languages. What other concepts are like this?

One of the problems posed by the advent of any powerful new tool, technique, or concept is visualizing projects big enough and significant enough to be worthy of all that power. We now have powerful new tools, fax machines, satellites and dishes, computers, and a huge corpus of names to work on. Now we need a big challenging project, something like a comparative study of the world's naming systems, using all the world's names. It could cover both geographic and personal names. The geographical names could include names of streets, neighborhoods, and regions of all sizes and types which BGN has traditionally eschewed.

We don't know all the world's naming systems, but we know some. We don't know all the distribution patterns, but we know some. We don't have a full complement of broad hypotheses, theories, and laws covering geographic names, but we have some. We still have much to learn about international cooperation, but we are doing it.

The current effort to inventory all the US placenames is a great start, but I have faith that someone will come up with a really big project involving many people, much time, much shedding of mental set, and much fun. And in that faith I am, as in preschool days, com-fort-able.

Bethesda, Maryland

Notes

1. This is a revised version of an address delivered at the US Board on Geographical Names Centennial Seminar on September 6, 1990. I am delighted to have this opportunity to contribute to Kelsie's festschrift, and what better way than with a paper read at the seminar for which he was the keynote speaker.

2. Years ago, on a visit to Tunisia, I was given a small piece of red wood identified by the donor as *corail*. A few years later I encountered, in a book on the forest species of the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi, the botanical name *Pterocarpus soyauxii* TAUB equated to a handful of vernacular names including *ngola*. Its distribution was given as Cameroon to Angola. The wood was described as follows: "Rouge. Très exploité, le bois réduit en poudre et mélangé à l'huile de palme donne le ngula ou tukula dont les indigènes s'enduisent le corps. Noms commerciaux: Corail, Ngula" (Gillardin 143).

3. I read this paper as retiring vice president for Section E, American Association for the Advancement of Science, in Berkeley, California, on December 29, 1954. An abridged version was published in 1956 in two installments.

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Call for Papers

In 1992 *Names* will mark the quincentennial of Columbus' arrival in the New World with a special issue (September 1992) devoted to the impact of Columbus on the placename cover of the Western Hemisphere.

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