Linguistic Approaches to Names

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Onomastic studies attract specialists in a large number of disci-
plines, though in the first two indexes of *Names* (15.4 and 30.4),
headings for *linguistic* are seldom represented, nor are *dialect, phonet-
ics, grammar,* or *syntax.* This fact may only be due to authors' phrasing
of titles, but one's general impression is that writers most often
approach names from the viewpoints of literature, psychology, child-
naming, cartography and geography, historical records, and the like, all
relating—loosely speaking—to the "meaning" of names.

Since names are important elements in language, their full treatment
should be grounded in the various approaches of the field of linguistics,
on the one hand, utilizing the principles and tools of studying speech and
discourse and, on the other, noting the special aspects of the comple-
mentary medium, writing and print. The two channels interact with each
other, and these mutual influences too must be examined with care.

Leaving aside at this time the practical decisions of officials in
society who create names, mostly in print, for places, metropolitan
districts, streets, departments, organizations, social programs, works of
art, and commercial products, a large proportion of the names in our
experience have arisen in speech and until possibly reproduced in
written form, like the rest of language, have been transmitted through
generations of users in oral form.

Names in speech may be studied within the sub-discipline of
phonetics, whether in French, English, Inuktitut, Chickasaw, or other
languages. Spoken forms of names can be transcribed in broad or
narrow symbolization (and of course in recent decades captured by
recording), and the various specific pronunciations can serve as the basis
for the wider establishment of the name. This has been the approach of
field-workers in the North American Linguistic Atlas projects (which
have assembled numerous geographic names) and is the method used in
ascertaining indigenous names in the United States and Canada. Except

in scholarly reports, names phonetically transcribed cannot serve as printed forms for public use, so that an intervening stage recognizing the phonological systems of the speakers providing the forms and also the probably different phonological system of the transcriber need to be consciously kept in mind. Unless systematically trained to be acutely conscious of speech, transcribers tend to hear names through the grid of their own phonemic systems and be hardly aware of certain details in the names uttered by their informants. The outcome of these several stages of collecting is a form of the name translated into the orthographic conventions of the national language. Awareness of normal speech phenomena of language contact in dealing with non-English tongues can help collectors to select a usable form of a geographic or personal name. For example if the spelling in the Midwest or Southwest United States is in Spanish or French, when pronounced in English fashion the result is often a spelling pronunciation and not an approximation of a Spanish or French form; e.g., *Los Angeles* and *Longueuil* (and *Québec*). Once some orthographic records have been made, the names pass on to higher authorities such as publishers of tourist maps, postal officials, or names officials in governmental departments and on up to the national level.

The spoken exchange between a person using a name and a collector registering the name is a model of what occurred in early times when explorers, soldiers, mariners, workers, and missionaries came to North America and, from the vantage point of their national language, imitated names uttered by indigenous people or recorded as well as they could the names of the topographic features they observed. Again research in languages and dialects in contact offers a framework for the names established in the printed record. For instance, English speakers in Newfoundland heard from a few natives a word which the visitors believed referred to the nation itself: *Beothuk*, in modern times pronounced [bi'ɑθɪk]. Officers, clergymen, merchants heard in their own dialects many variants which they recorded in diverse and bizarre spellings until agreement finally settled on the contemporary form, *Beothuk,* sometimes varying with *Beothuck*.

Especially important for the early period are the maps recording geographic names in Portuguese, Spanish, French, English, and Basque presenting to the modern analyst both the phonetics implied by the spellings and the confusion occurring when map names in one language were copied into those of other languages. Specialists in the examination of these maps have thus had to deal with the lexicon of these European

languages and the unsettled spelling systems used by the cartographers. With wars and economic competition, maps in one language replaced the assortment of maps of earlier centuries and traditional spellings of geographic names began to be established. With this large body of documentary evidence, a scholar specializing in early spelling conventions and Renaissance printing can trace the development into settled forms of outlandish terms which became established. All these aspects of recorded names found in historical sources require linguistic and other skills to understand how the modern forms became fixed.

In addition to pronunciations of names and the associated spellings appearing in maps and printed materials, linguistics can also be employed in understanding the grammar and lexicon of English geographic names. For instance, the word *watern* appears in several eastern Canadian names such as *Watern Cove*. This symbolizes the pronunciation of the settlers copied by officials recording the name. When this is noted beside other names with *watering*, it can be seen that the *-ing* suffix has been reduced to an *-n* by predictable phonetic processes. In former ages of sailing ships, it was critical for crews to locate resources on the shore for replenishing their supplies of fresh water (the name *Freshwater* also appears) and wood. Hence, watering (watern) places were important to locate and name.

A major issue in orthography and grammar in the last few centuries has been the establishment of standardized names for government and public use (which parallels the trend to one particular spelling of most words in general dictionaries). In addition to the erratic indications of genitive nouns with apostrophes found in manuscripts, printed matter, and names in commerce, names authorities, at least in the United States and Canada, officially disfavor the spelling of geographic names with *'s*. In contrast to the torrent of edited prose in newspapers and magazines containing genitive apostrophes, maps and gazetteers, with some special exceptions, print geographic names ending in an added *-s* without an apostrophe.

The grammar of modern English, the linguist suggests, does have nouns in speech with genitive inflections (*child + s, children + s*), and the evolved convention of using explicit apostrophes does conveniently symbolize the genitive function. This use of the apostrophe is a morphemic graph in the sense that other arbitrary symbols indicate meaning: decimal points, superscripts, and initial upper-case letters, for instance. In geographic names, however, a convention excluding

apostrophes creates a number of problems of interpretation. Does a name with a surname as the first element signal a genitive or a plural (lower-case initials are used here): *richards point*; *moores hill*? If the first element is a surname sometimes correctly spelled with an *-s* and sometimes without an *-s*, which is indicated in a geographic name: *adams lookout, parsons pond*? If the first element when pronounced ends in *-s*, *-z*, *-ch*, *-dge*, or *-sh*, what approved spelling is selected for a genitive geographic name: *davises gulch*, *lawlesses hill*, *lynchs pond*, *petchs lookout*, *welshs bight*? It would seem that the loss of the useful visual convention of the apostrophe, representing both the spoken form and the semantic function of the genitive inflection, is producing ambiguity in numerous names by the blanket prohibition by names authorities. Genitives, with apostrophes, indicate some feature of possession or intimate relationship; plurals in *-s* without apostrophes, by contrast, before a noun indicate an attributive function (as in *names authorities* above).

The handling of genitive inflections in printed materials involves typographic conventions and morphology, as well as syntactic relations between modifiers and headwords. However, a more complex and challenging area on the level of syntax arises in the interpretation of geographic names of three or more parts (not even counting the complexities of such compound specifics as *thwartships, gooseberry, saltwater, whitewood*, and all compass terms *(southwest)*. Although the great proportion of names in a community have two or three parts, a sizable group has four elements, and sometimes a number of modifying prepositional phrases occur in names. When used in ordinary conversation, these multi-part names have the conventional English suprasegmental patterns—degrees of stress which, in addition to the components themselves, signal the relations of the words. Ordinarily the meanings of the component parts are not consciously considered by inhabitants of the place; however, in nearly all cases the constituents are susceptible to analysis and the meanings of the parts contribute to the complex meaning of the whole. Such an analysis of the printed name often is ambiguous to a person unfamiliar with the locale and with nearby contrasting names in the area. The genuine names used here may all be understood by breaking the parts down into immediate constituents to reveal the relationships. One useful graphic technique is to enclose related words in parentheses and brackets, revealing the components forming the entire construction. The following examples were collected

in the Placentia Bay names project and by linguist Trevor Porter in Trinity Bay, Newfoundland.

Gulliver's Mill Pond. Mill pond in its spoken form shows that it is not a compound. Consequently the structure of the name is [(gulliver's mill) pond]; the pond associated with Gulliver's mill.

Black Duck Pond. Newfoundlanders name a certain bird species black ducks, a compound. Therefore the name is [(black duck) pond].

Green's Harbour Rock. Porter's fieldwork showed this to be a feature in Green's Harbour. Since *harbour rock* is frequent in Newfoundland usage, the name otherwise seems ambiguous. The analysis is [(green's harbour) rock].

Lower Lance Cove Head. Built upon the name Lance Cove Head, the analysis would be <lower [(lance cove) head]>.

Tommy's Head Garden Pond. Garden Pond is not a named feature in Trinity Bay, but the sense is the pond near the garden: <(tommy's head) (garden pond)>.

Upper Hay Island Cove. There is a nearby name containing *lower*; thus <upper[(hay island) cove]>.

With additional knowledge about the names we are able to analyze written examples as well; these are from the Newfoundland *Gazetteer*:

Pouch Cove Northeast Pond. This refers to the northeast pond in the vicinity of Pouch Cove: <(Pouch Cove) (Northeast Pond)>.

Rattling Brook Big Pond. Big Pond and Rattling Brook are contiguous; the name focuses on the pond: <(Rattling Brook) (Big Pond)>.

Syntactic relationships do exist in these selected geographic names, especially in their spoken form; but for people interested in meaning, they may be just daunting on the occasion of their first printed appearance.

At any point in the creation of names, from their familiar use in daily conversations through their appearance in printed roadsigns, reports, fiction, and poetry, to their final destination in topographic maps and gazetteers, specialists in linguistics can increase understanding of what is going on in this special area of language. They cannot make the decisions leading to standardization and consistency in the forms of names, but they can illuminate the paths leading to those final forms.