Toponymic Generics I

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SINCE THE LAYMAN'S TERMINOLOGY for physical features is the basic one – *river*, *lake*, *mountain*, *bay*, *swamp*, *island*, etc., with which all professionals were familiar long before they became professionals and upon which the professional's terminology is essentially superimposed, a fuller understanding of the layman's terms should facilitate communication between at least professional and layman, and perhaps also between professionals. This study of toponymic generics, terms for physical features used in geographic names, was undertaken as a step toward that fuller understanding.

There are several reasons for directing the study at toponymic generics. These are the terms that are identified with specific individual features by layman and professional alike. Jones Prairie may look like a marsh to you, but if enough people call it prairie, that is what a prairie is to them (or that area), and that is what you will call it if you want to communicate to them an idea about it. Undoubtedly, one of the most important factors in the spread of topographic terms has been the naming of individual features. Actual or fancied resemblance of a strange natural feature and a familiar object is enough to start the process. An apt term, applied to more features of comparable appearance and with different specifics, becomes a toponymic generic. Once established it tends to persist even though its connotation may come to be almost the opposite of the original application, and even though the original resembling object passes out of use and generations arise who never saw one or heard of one.

In addition to the philosophical considerations, a practical consideration is the relative ease of collecting large numbers of toponymic generics and identifying their location for study. They are shown on maps from which one can infer many of the characteristics

of the features. Word geography dealing with common nouns spoken in context, of which the Linguistic Atlas is a wonderful example, is in some ways superior, but such word-gathering entails many years of field work and considerable expense. Even then the informant's concepts of features not seen in his locality or his travels could only come from literature, pictures and maps, and the pictures and maps at least are likely to associate the feature and its toponym.

The tangible end product of this study will be a dictionary of toponymic generics in the United States, presenting a proposed standard connotation for each term and citing each variant connotation with the region of its occurrence. As a by-product along the way there will be an atlas of maps showing the distribution of occurrence of each term, so far as found, in the United States. It is hoped that this may be published soon to make available the distributional information now in hand as source material to facilitate and stimulate research contributions by others.

Waldo L. Schmitt, in his address at the Zoologists dinner at the St. Louis meeting of the AAAS in 1952, in calling attention to the growing importance of taxonomy, pointed out that it is largely devoted to knowing the scientific names of organisms.[1] He quoted from George Gaylord Simpson[2] a passage that is pertinent here: "It is impossible to speak of the objects of any study, or to think lucidly about them, unless they are named. It is impossible to examine their relationship to each other and their places among the vast, incredibly complex phenomena of the universe, in short to treat them scientifically, without putting them into some sort of formal arrangement...Taxonomy is at the same time the most elementary and the most inclusive part of zoology, most elementary because animals cannot be discussed or treated in a scientific way until some taxonomy has been achieved, and the most inclusive because taxonomy in its various guises and branches eventually gathers together, utilizes, summarizes, and implements everything that is known about animals..."

The lack of established meaningful categories has been a handicap

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[1] "Applied Systematics: The Usefulness of Scientific Names of Animals and Plants." By Waldo L. Schmitt. *Annual Report of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution.* Washington D. C., 1954.

[2] "The Principles of Classification and a Classification of Mammals". *Bulletin of the American Museum of Natural History.* Vol. 85 (1945), pp. 1ff.

in this study. Lacking them and names for them, features to which terms were applied often had to be described at some length, and the descriptions may or may not have identified the most significant characteristics. Search in the literature and inquiry among friends expert in such matters for suitable categories of such things as flowing waterbodies and wetlands brought to light none that is fully satisfactory for this purpose. The wetland classification by Martin and others[3] done for the Fish and Wildlife Service while this study was in process approaches the problem but from a quite different angle, and includes categories such as "Open Fresh Water" that cover a variety of features. The statement "Open water may completely occupy lake and pond basins, potholes, limestone sinks, sloughs, or stream beds, or it may be fringed with marsh" is illustrative. "Pothole" and "slough" are not defined and could apply to quite different things. Digression to make my own categories would have postponed this study too long, but some categorization will have to be done before completing the dictionary and maps of regional connotations.

The Method

The procedures followed in this study were modified several times in the early stages. A recital of methods is pertinent to an evaluation of the author's statements and maps. The generic terms occurring on each available United States standard topographic map, including composite proofs as they were circulated, were recorded on a 3×5 card headed by the quadrangle name, publishing agency, scale, publication date or dates, and southeast corner coordinates of latitude and longitude. All of the recording of terms from an estimated 15,000 sheets was done personally by the author. A check has been available in that for at least a third of the maps different editions or scales of maps of the same area have been carded at different times, or the carding of one has been checked against another, or the carding of a proof checked against the final color edition. In addition, occurrence of two terms on all the

[3] "Classification of Wetlands of the United States". By the Wetlands Classification Committee of the Fish and Wildlife Service, Alexander C. Martin, chairman, Neil Hotchkiss, Francis M. Uhler, and Warren S. Bourn. Special Scientific Report, *Wildlife* No. 20. U. S. Department of the Interior. Washington, D. C., June 1953. 14 pp. mimeographed.

topographic maps and of another term on perhaps a third of the maps was recorded independently by a research assistant. Since the frequency of omission was found to be low and of mistakes in recording even lower, error at this stage is believed to be not significant to the conclusions.

The terms were arranged on the card by class of feature, each of which was assigned a line in approximately the same position on the card. The classes used were: running water and watercourses, standing water, elevations, breaches in elevations, linear lowlands or depressions, non-linear lowlands including low flatlands, volcanic features other than elevations, solution features, glaciers, non-linear depressions or reentrants on land n.e.c., coastal and lake shore waterbodies, coastal and lake shore land features, grasslands, wetlands, woodlands, islands, springs and geysers, river obstructions or bends, portages or related features, and artificial or severely modified watercourses. Few maps had named features in more than ten categories so there was space enough for listing without subsequent rearrangement. In those cases when even with liberal use of abbreviations the 3×5 card did not give enough length for one or two of the lines, there was always space for continuing immediately below the right hand hand half of the line without confusion.

The classes used in the listing were modified in some details from the original scheme shortly after starting. Perhaps still other changes would have helped. Running water and watercourses could have been separated in some arbitrary manner, but in view of previous knowledge that water terms and valley terms often refer both to the water and to the linear depression in which it flows, and that a water term such as *creek* and a valley term such as *coulee* are often used for practically identical features side by side, separation seemed likely to be more bother than it would be worth, particularly since the distinction indicated by italic type for streams vs roman type for valleys on the maps is not always consistent for a given term and some topographic maps do not use italics for water names. Later, when valley terms showed up applied to running waterbodies with practically no valley above the water surface, and stream terms applied to watercourses bone dry most of the time, it seemed that it would have been a good idea after all, but then the listing was too far along.

The boundary between toponymic generics and the designator

term in names like Devils Kitchen or Great White Throne is not a clear cut one. *Roost*, as applied to elevations or their highest points, was not recorded when the first few scattered ones were encountered and by the time its considerable frequency and spread were realized there remained doubt that this term rated being classed with the generics. *Cathedral* was not recorded but *castle* and *tower* were, the difference being that *castle* and *tower* occurred in ways that seemed to qualify whereas *cathedral* did not. The first instances of *low gap* and *high top* were missed on first carding because recurrence and apparent function in distinguishing from gaps and tops were not anticipated. Decisions on these questions were arrived at subjectively, influenced by personal bias. The number of terms and occurrences omitted is small, however, if recollection serves correctly.

It was not always possible to tell whether something like "Sand Hills" on the map was intended as a toponym or as "map information". It was assumed that that particular notation was map information and dunes were not recorded unless with a specific. Cedar Swamp, on the other hand was assumed to be a toponym, even when there was more than one on the same sheet, since it occurs with non-descriptive specifics such as Jones Cedar Swamp.

Terms such as *spring* were generally not recorded when the map showed only a symbol and the word, since it was not always clear that that term would have been used in the toponym for that feature. Combinations of *spring* with a qualifier, – boiling spring, sulphur spring, mineral spring, etc., were recorded only for hot spring. Terms such as *sugarloaf* and *hogback*, with or without the definite article, were recorded.

Plural and singular forms were distinguished for *mountain(s)* *hill(s)*, and a few others, but not for such terms as *flat*, *meadow*, *spring*, *wood*, and others commonly used indiscriminately in either the singular or plural.

False generics, such as *knoll* in Oak Knoll Brook or both *knoll* and *brook* in Oak Knoll Brook Deadwater, and even questionable false generics such as *mott* in Mott Creek which probably was named for a person, were listed in parentheses. The names from which they came were written on the back of the card with a designation of the entity to which the name applied, such as populated place or school. Unusual applications of terms were also noted on the back.

The completed cards, one for each map examined, were filed by states in order of latitude and longitude, convenient for mapping and revealing names. The occurrence of each term was then plotted on a 1 : 5,000,000 scale Geological Survey brown line index base map by an X covering the area of the sheet from which the term was recorded, showing at a glance the scale of the map from which the evidence was taken. Most of the plotting in the eastern two thirds of the country was done by research assistants, with a generous sample checked. A few errors were made but practically all were caught immediately by the original plotter and corrected.

Since the accuracy of the term-distribution maps will not exceed the accuracy of the primary data, it is pertinent to examine the limitations, for purpose of this study, inherent in the topographic maps. The limitations are several and regrettable but by no means fatal. The areal coverage is incomplete and for some mapped areas only reconnaissance maps are available. The name coverage appears to be incomplete on a large percent of the maps at all scales. Errors in names are known to have been introduced at each step in the process leading to the published map. Ambiguous or misleading placement of names on maps may lead to erroneous conclusions as to connotation of the generics. Inadequate symbolization precludes interpretive distinction of differentiations in connotation that are actually made by the local people.

Absence of any topographic map is obviously the most serious limitation, for no other standard map series pretends to show and name the wide range of physical features being covered, although some show selected categories in some detail. The chief gaps in coverage are three great crescents, one from southern Virginia to southwestern Mississippi with an extension in the northern and southern parts of the Florida peninsula, the high plains from west Texas to eastern Montana, and one from western N. Mexico to eastern Oregon. Smaller and interrupted gaps occur in Tennessee, northern Indiana, the northern half of Michigan's lower peninsula, east central Wisconsin, most of Iowa and Minnesota, southwestern Wyoming, south Texas and east Texas. A number of the gaps are rapidly being filled by large scale maps, but others are not scheduled for mapping. Each new map helps to round out the distribution picture. Some introduce new terms or connotations, and since this will continue more or less indefinitely the study here reported on might be described as "open-ended".

For considerable areas west of the Mississippi River, the only topographic maps are half degree and one degree quadrangles. All of the 60 minute quads used, with one exception in eastern Montana, are west of longitude 109 and east of the Sierra Nevada and the Cascade Mountains. Some of these maps are forty years old or more and show little detail. For the most part they carry few names, but some have a surprising variety of terms. A few carry terms not used as generics on later larger scale maps covering part of the same area. A few in mountain country carry a large number of names and a variety of generics. The distribution patterns will be further refined as new maps on larger scales show more detail and more names. For some terms this will probably be important, for others it may make little difference.

It is difficult to determine how many names in current local use are omitted from the maps, but there is evidence that even 7.5′ quadrangles omit some physical feature names that are in local use. Although this enlarges the apparent nonoccurrence areas, especially in the case of terms for the smaller features, the patterns are probably not changed much in major outline unless whole categories are left unnamed on all the maps in a sizeable area, or unless there are thus omitted the scattered but sometimes significant occurrences of otherwise regionally concentrated terms.

In addition to omissions due to scale or the avoidance of clutter there are probably some generics made into false generics by the addition of another generic. The feature long known locally and in the literature as Allens Fresh appears as Allens Fresh Run on the Popes Creek, Md., 7.5′ Corps of Engineers topographic map (published by the Geological Survey in civil edition). Just how this came about the author has not investigated, but there are several possibilities. An influx of new residents could bring about general unfamiliarity with the highly local topographic connotation of *fresh*, with the result that they themselves add a generic that is appropriate either in terms of their own experience or in the local habit. Such persons may have been the informants of the name collector. The name collector himself may have been unfamiliar with the term as a generic and interpreted the answer to a query such as "What is the name of that run ?" to mean that Allens Fresh was only the specific part of the name. At a later stage a map editor may have assumed that the names report was faulty, that certainly the generic had been left off unintentionally, and put one

on. Conceivably there may even have been name gatherers or editors whose bias in favor of the nomenclature pattern to which they were accustomed was so strong that the change was made despite abundant evidence.

Spelling is for some people a highly personal matter, not something to be conventionalized just because pedagogues say it should. Too, a name is usually spelled at will. Ella may think that plain ordinary spelling is a slur on her personality, and that *Ela* would be more exotic looking. It is. If mother likes the looks of *Jerold* better than *Gerald* how do you think it will read on the birth certificate? If something originally christened Jones Sluice is pronounced Jones Sloosh or Jones Slooch, there will be those who spell it as it sounds. *Sluice* wasn't always spelled that way, for that matter. At any rate there are variant spellings of a fair number of the generics on the list. In at least one case variant spellings of the same word have served to differentiate connotations. *Slue*, to some persons, refers to an underwater channel in a sand bar along the coast rather than to one of the entities ordinarily called *slough*. At first glance there is some virtue in this, but it is no help in oral communication, no more help than different pronunciations of the same spelling would be to one reading the names.

An instance of possibly ambiguous application is Cape Poge Gut on the Edgartown, Mass., 7.5′ quadrangle. The name is placed on the water in such position that a person familiar with the application of *gut* to narrow coastal waterbodies might infer that it applied to the passage between the end of Cape Poge Elbow and North Neck. The type classification, however, is for a land feature and presumably the name applies to a narrow part of North Neck. This is supported by another occurrence of the term *gut* for the neck of a peninsula in this same general area.

Digressing a moment, *elbow*, here used for a spit, is applied to such a miscellany of features – almost anything having a bend or angle – and so rarely recurs in the same connotation or in the same region that it can hardly be said to perform the function of a true generic. Certainly it makes little contribution to standard connotations.

A problem of interpretation is posed by two pocosons on the Hackney, N. C., quadrangle, one shown with the wetland symbol, the other without. Either these two are essentially alike or the distinction of a particular category of wetflat land presumably made

by the persons who named them was not precisely the distinction that one would expect.

One result of the present study should be fewer ambiguously placed names on maps. This is not to say that they are frequent now, but rather that they should not happen at all and that understanding of regional connotations will help eliminate them. As a case in point, *hammock* was encountered in a name spread along the middle of a mud flat, an application distinctly aberrant. On checking the coast chart it was found that the name was meant for the island on one side of the flat. The name had been placed beside the island instead of on it and a map compiler had apparently thought it a name for the flat and centered it. This can be readily corrected in subsequent editions, but in the meantime *hammock* may have sprouted a new connotation in the mind of someone who sees that application.

In general the kinds of placement involving some ambiguity, in addition to the placement of land names on water areas and water names on land in order to leave the other area for map information, involve the extent or continuity of the named feature. Does Jones Peak apply to the sharp apex or to the whole mass of the relief feature? It may well be that the local people use the name for both or for either at different times and have never bothered to discriminate. The name has to be put somewhere, though, and in the absence of full understanding of regional connotations the map makers solution will be either a shop rule or a series of more or less unrelated subjective judgments. Either can lead to misconceptions on the part of readers of the maps.

In fairness to both the study and the makers of the topographic maps it should be stressed at this point that the virtues of the maps far outweigh their shortcomings. One cannot fail to be more impressed with the accomplishments reflected by the maps than with their faults. This study would not have been feasible without them.

(To be concluded)