



“Missoree Was Always Out of Step with Missourah”: Sociolinguistic Variants as Moral Toponyms

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Abstract

Language users can create moral geographies, in which values are mapped in space, by indexically linking values and spatial referents. One understudied aspect of linguistic practice in this domain is the role of toponyms in constructing a moral geography. This investigation illustrates how sociolinguistic variants of a toponym can be used to construct a moral geography. I take as a case study sociolinguistic variation in the US state name *Missouri*, which can be produced as *Missouree* or *Missourah*. Qualitative analysis of a set of local newspaper columns shows these variants can be used as place names. However, they do not distinguish regions of physical space. Rather, the variants label moral spaces by setting each variant on opposing ends of cultural, geographic, and political axes of contrast. Because their primary role is to label moral space, I suggest that toponymic studies should consider the kind of geography that a toponym labels space within. I consider the usage here to be examples of “moral toponyms”, in contrast to traditional toponyms which label physical space.

Keywords: toponym, socioonomastics, choronym, moral geography, variation, Missouri, St. Louis

Introduction

The critical turn in geography has brought new perspectives on how researchers in the field study spaces, and how people interact with and understand them. One such perspective is that of “moral geography”, which involves examining how people and societies associate different spaces with values (Williams 2017). In effect, this perspective considers how space itself acquires social meaning. Linguistic anthropologists have adopted the idea of the moral geography to consider how speakers construct moral spaces through language use (Hall 2019; Sicoli 2016; Leap 2010; Modan 2007; Hill 1995; Hoëm 1993). Place names are inherently connected to human geography (Gammeltoft 2016) and can associate with moral values (Ameel & Ainiala 2018; Basso 1996). Therefore, one might expect the examination of moral geographies from a linguistic anthropological perspective to extend to toponyms. However, such studies tend to set aside toponyms, instead focusing on how a place is spoken about with deictics, descriptions, and other strategies (see for example Sicoli 2016; Modan 2007; Hill 1995).

Accordingly, this investigation explores this neglected aspect of the social meaning of toponyms: their use to label a place within a moral space in addition to physical space. These dual roles can overlap, and evaluating a geographical feature or the people living near it is certainly a possible naming strategy that would achieve this (Blair & Tent 2021). However, I am particularly interested in whether the toponymy of a moral space can be separated from the toponymy of physical space. I suggest that sociolinguistic variation in the production of a place name may be one route for achieving this distinction. Sociolinguistic variation can be seen as two ways of saying the same thing (Labov 1972), and in this sense the variants refer to the same physical space. However, because sociolinguistic variants can index social categories and values (Eckert 2008; Johnstone & Kiesling 2008; Johnstone et al. 2006; Silverstein 2003), the variants may be associated with differing moral spaces. Such usage could be one way that variability in place name production can serve as markers of community allegiance and group identity (Ainiala 2016; Scott 2016).

I demonstrate this usage through a case study of the US state of *Missouri*. It is fairly well-known that the name is variable in pronunciation, with either a final [i] (referred to here as *Missouree*) or [ə] (referred to here as *Missourah*). This variation is socially conditioned (Lance 2003; Read 1933). In this case study, I qualitatively examine such usage in newspaper articles by Bill McClellan, a local interest columnist for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. I illustrate a creative usage of the variants in his writing in which *Missouree* and *Missourah* are distinct place names which do not represent distinct physical spaces. I suggest that McClellan’s writing constructs a moral geography in which the two names represent contrasting moral spaces. I consider these names to be examples of moral toponyms: place names, but mapped to moral space instead of physical space. The data, while limited in scope through the focus on a single writer, nonetheless demonstrates that such usage is possible. I therefore call for further research into this use of toponymy both to better understand how productive such usage is across larger datasets and as a way of expanding upon socioonomastic and critical approaches to toponymic studies (Vuolteenaho et al. 2019; Ainiala & Östman 2017; Ainiala 2016; Berg & Vuolteenaho 2009).

Background

In this section, I offer background on what a moral geography is and how one is constructed through language use. I note that toponyms can potentially make up part of this language use through their associative meaning with values and historical events (Ameel & Ainiala 2018). I suggest that sociolinguistic variation in toponym production is an especially fruitful path for research in this domain and introduce variation in production of *Missouri* as a case study.

Moral Geography, Toponyms, and Sociolinguistic Variation

We can conceive of a moral geography by analogy to other geographies. A physical geography describes landmarks and their distribution in space. A social geography, meanwhile, describes social groups, their distribution in space, and the ways in which they interact with landmarks and the built environment. A moral geography, therefore, describes the distribution of values and evaluable attributes in space (Williams 2017). Some approaches to this concept place these values in physical space (Duncan & Duncan 2004; Matless 1997). For example, Duncan & Duncan (2004) illustrate how a wealthy suburb of New York City reproduces ideological values such as anti-urbanism and anti-modernism through the aesthetic production and marketing of itself as a New England village within a pastoral landscape.

Linguistic anthropologists have taken the moral geography to be more abstract. Modan (2007) views a moral geography as one type of spatio-discursive practice (cf. Lefebvre 1991). In this sense, a moral geography is a discourse of values that a community produces through talk about space and place. Producing such a discourse relies on the indexical relations between an utterance and its social meaning. Indexical relations arise when the representation of a linguistic feature makes reference to a social category. This link between feature and category can occur across different orders of indexicality (Johnstone & Kiesling 2008; Johnstone et al. 2006; Silverstein 2003), in which lower-order indexicals reflect patterns like correlations between sociolinguistic variation and social categories, and higher-order indexicals display increasing meta-awareness of the links between a feature and a social category. The highest order of indexicality discussed in Johnstone et al.'s (2006) formulation of this concept occurs when community members openly discuss linguistic features. Knowledge of the indexical link between feature and category is explicitly commented on, and speakers are able to actively use variants to perform and evaluate social categories.

Through linguistic practice, speakers therefore construct a moral geography when they create indexical links between a value and a spatial referent. This spatial referent is often metaphorical, without specific mappings to physical locations. For speakers, the utility of a moral geography lies in these indexical links. As with indexical links to categories, speaking of valued spaces can indicate where one's values are shared and who shares those values, or alternatively where one's values are not shared. References to distance, mobility, and the like can contribute to this construction as well. Note that this linking of values to space is a community-specific practice; communities with opposing values will not necessarily agree upon the links or how to evaluate them even among communities with otherwise shared linguistic systems. Community specificity is not unique to the creation of a moral geography. Social groups more generally organize space by how they interact with it—a practice which extends to naming (Rutkowski 2000).

One example of a moral geography comes from Hill's (1995) analysis of a Mexicano narrative. In it, Don Gabriel, the narrator, tells the story of his experience with his son's violent death. Hill notes that Don Gabriel consistently frames the narrative in terms of a center and a periphery. The son is safe in their village (the center) but goes away to the periphery where he dies. The bad news is brought from a distant location to Don Gabriel's home, and he then travels to the periphery to identify the body. Competing values that arise during the narration are associated with one of these deictic referents: the center is linked to order, the sacred, the pueblo, etc., while the periphery is linked to disorder, the devil, the urban, and the like. This linking of values with space is a moral geography. Here the narrative use of mobility is used to convey leaving a safe situation for a dangerous one, and the encountering of values not shared by Don Gabriel. We can see how Don Gabriel's moral geography is specific to his rural community as well. The negative evaluation of the urban periphery is presumably not shared by people from such spaces. This style of moral geography, which distinguishes between a center and periphery, is not uncommon. Sicoli (2016) finds a similar practice among Zapotec speakers in Lachixiá, Mexico; and Hoëm (1993) does as well among Tokelau speakers in the South Pacific.

Modan (2007) observes locals' construction of a moral geography in a neighborhood of Washington, D.C. She finds this neighborhood to have competing values regarding the neighborhood's and local government's roles in addressing community issues. Rather than assign values to deictic referents, locals frame the neighborhood as "urban" or "suburban" in conversation. Cultural archetypes are associated with each of these spaces, and Modan finds that locals draw on the archetypes to assign values to the "urban" and "suburban". For example, speakers who assert the urbanness of the neighborhood acknowledge elements of

disorder and danger; at the same time, they emphasize the heterogeneity of the neighborhood. In contrast, a person who is described as belonging in the suburbs is said to prefer order, safety, and homogeneity.

As these examples show, each space in a moral geography has an indexical field—a constellation of related values (Eckert 2008)—associated with it. For example, Hill’s center is linked to order, the sacred, and the pueblo. Note that these and other values in the examples above are not necessarily “moral values” in the sense that may be passed through religious or ethical teachings. Rather, these values are ideological stances or positive/negative evaluations of an attribute indexed by the space. In both Hill’s (1995) and Modan’s (2007) work, the values assigned to the spaces in a moral geography fall along what Modan (2007) describes as binary axes of contrast, in which the values are oppositional. For Hill, if the center has order, the periphery has disorder. For Modan, if the city is heterogeneous, the suburb is homogeneous. Each individual value associated with a space has a contrast that yields oppositional indexical fields within the moral geography.

Strategies for constructing a moral geography through language use include deictic reference, descriptions of a location, and other ways of talking about a place. The use of toponyms would seem to be one such viable strategy as well. Part of the meaning of a place name is the “contents of information, images, or associations pertaining to a name” that come to be associated with it (Ameel & Ainiala 2018, 197). That is, a place name can develop indexical links between it and other pieces of information such as values. There are several ways in which this development can occur. Basso (1996) notes that Western Apache toponyms make reference to historical events by referring to the causes and/or consequences of the event. In doing so, such names carry Apache morals and values in their meaning. Similarly, Ameel & Ainiala (2018, 199) observe that a toponym can index an association with historical events or social situations even when there is no literal meaning that would reference them. *Tarkk’ampujankatu*, a street name in Helsinki, is used in a Finnish novella to make a moral statement through the street’s historical association with brothels. Also in Finland, Vuolteenaho et al. (2019) show how unofficial toponyms for a Helsinki suburb are linked to place-based identities as well as in-group/out-group identities. Meanwhile, Carnavale et al. (2021) find that religious toponyms along the edge of a Macedonian village in Albania place a moral boundary between the village and non-socially organized space outside. These examples show that place names can be used to situate a place in a moral space in addition to a physical space.

It is perhaps surprising, then, that the use of toponyms in constructing a moral geography has not been discussed much in prior literature. In Sicoli’s (2016) work, for example, the use of toponyms to describe a place is noted among other strategies. However, because the moral geography in the community he studied juxtaposes the center and periphery, toponyms mainly appear as references to sites on the periphery, which are then discussed and valued through other conversational strategies. In contrast, Van de Putte (2021) places emphasis on toponyms themselves in his analysis of how Poles use *Auschwitz/Oświęcim*. These names refer to roughly the same physical town, but they are “stripped off of their identical toponymical meaning” (Van de Putte 2021, 93) when locals use them as labels for distinct memoryscapes: the German *Auschwitz* places the town in the era of Nazi atrocities through its link to the nearby concentration camp of the same name; and the Polish *Oświęcim* situates the town in the postwar era.

I suggest, following Van de Putte’s (2021) approach, that to better understand how toponyms may be used to construct a moral geography, it would be useful to examine them in a context that separates their reference to a physical location from their indexing of values. One potential environment for this is when we encounter sociolinguistic variation in a place name. In socioonomastics, such variation can involve competing alternatives (Ainiala & Östman 2017; Ainiala 2016), such as local place names for neighborhoods that may include an evaluative element like *Hell’s Kitchen* (Allen 1993). However, here, I focus on sociolinguistic variation as variation in pronunciation of a single name (Scott 2016). The literal meaning of sociolinguistic variants is usually taken to be the same, especially when such variation is phonological (Labov 1972). For example, whether “something” is pronounced with a final [ŋ] or [n] does not affect the meaning of the word. However, the two variants have different social meanings and can index different values and identities (Campbell-Kibler 2007). In this light, a focus on variable place names may inform our understanding of whether and how toponyms are used in constructing a moral geography because while their literal meaning—a reference to a place in physical space—is identical, they may differ in what values they index.

There is evidence that variable place names can indeed differ in what values they index. For example, variation in production of street names is linked to indexicality. Regan (2022) shows experimentally that people in Austin, Texas, display awareness of the link between a local/non-local variant of a street name. For example, *Manor Road* among locals is referred to as [me.nə] while non-locals use the variant [mæ.nə]. The contrasting forms mark who is and is not from the city. However, indexical links to sociolinguistic variation in production of a place name, beyond local versus non-local, have not been clearly demonstrated in prior work.

Variation and Indexicality of Missouri

The research question is therefore whether sociolinguistic variants of the toponym *Missouri* can be used in constructing a moral geography, and if so, how. I focus on a single sociolinguistic variable: the pronunciation of the US state of *Missouri*. As noted by Baker (2001), a narrow focus on a single name can enable a better understanding of the sense of place associated with a name and how it is used. In this paper, a case study focusing on one sociolinguistic variable will enable a deeper qualitative analysis of how the variants are used and valued. The selected toponym, *Missouri*, is well-known both inside and outside the state for being variable in pronunciation. This variability centers on production of the final vowel, which may appear across a continuum of positions in the vowel space between [i] and [ə] (Lance 2003). However, the variants are often categorized as a binary (see for example Allen 1958): *Missouree* has a final [i], while *Missourah* has a final [ə].¹ Given that there are productions of the final vowel beyond [i] and [ə], a reviewer asks why the *Missouree* and *Missourah* variants stand out in public consciousness over others. Particularly in the case of the *Missouree* variant, this may be because similar productions are grouped together. In Lance's (2003) quantitative analyses, for example, he collapses the final vowels [i], [ɪ], and [ɨ] together into a single category of "high vowel". In this sense, it may be the case that the impression of the variation as binary may reflect social meaning being attached to general regions of the vowel space (i.e., high front/central vowel versus mid central vowel) as opposed to specific phones. Such a generalization may be due to regional variation in vowel systems across Missouri (Labov et al. 2006), although further research would be needed to conclusively prove such a causative link. For this investigation, I treat the state name as a binary sociolinguistic variable in accordance with the perception of the variable, both in the public imagination and in academic work (e.g., Allen 1958). As might be expected, the variable is highly indexicalized (Silverstein 2003). One illustration of this property can be found in a *New York Times* article from 2012 (Wheaton 2012). According to the article, state politicians make a conscious effort to use both variants when campaigning throughout the state so as to appeal to users of each variant.

I set aside the historical origins of the name itself and focus instead on the contrasting pronunciations of this toponym.² According to Lance (2003), *Missourah* was originally the preferred pronunciation of Missouri. This variant was covariable with *Missouree* during the 19th century, and Read (1933) suggests that speakers' usage of the variants was stratified by education level during this period. Lance (2003) shows that the *Missouree* variant was quickly adopted throughout the state in the second half of the 20th century. He surveyed speakers born before 1975, and found that while *Missourah* was favored among those born before 1945, those born between 1967-1975 strongly favored *Missouree*. Given that Read (1933) suggests that *Missouree* was the prescriptively correct variant even in the 19th century, this development appears to be a classic example of a change from above (Labov 1972). Lance (2003) also considers regional variation in production, which emerged most clearly in the postwar era before disappearing in the 1960s when the entire state shifted to strongly favoring *Missouree*. Generally speaking, the regional variability in *Missouri* has not patterned with the wide range of variation in vowel production across the state.³ For example, the major urban centers of St. Louis and Kansas City are quite different from one another from a dialectological perspective (Labov et al. 2006), yet both led the adoption of *Missouree*, particularly among speakers born between 1945-1959 and 1960-1966 (Lance 2003). In St. Louis in particular, Lance found that well over 80% of people born 1945-1966, inclusive, favored the *Missouree* variant, and usage of this variable was nearly categorical among those born 1967-1975, inclusive (2003, 277).

The variation in production of *Missouri* displays evidence of both lower and higher orders of indexicality (Johnstone et al. 2006; Silverstein 2003). Lance's (2003) data demonstrates a lower-order indexical: among speakers of a certain age, there is a metropolitan/non-metropolitan distinction in production. Lance notes that students at the University of Missouri associated *Missouree* with urban speakers and *Missourah* with rural speakers. This finding shows evidence of a higher-order indexical in that speakers had enough meta-knowledge of the variable to be able to classify other speakers based on its production. The *New York Times* article highlighting variability in production of the variable shows that it has become a still higher-order indexical. Speakers know and openly discuss what categories the variable corresponds to, and politicians' usage of the variable is a prime example of the ability to use higher-order indexicals to perform a social category. By using *Missouree*, they seek to portray themselves as urban/metropolitan, while using *Missourah* presents a rural/non-metropolitan identity. Using both variants is therefore a tactic to display in-group solidarity with urban and rural speakers alike. Politicians who skillfully use both variants are able to campaign for votes both inside and outside of their regional base.

Methods

Given the fact that variation in *Missouri* has become a higher-order indexical, this toponym was a strong candidate for use in constructing a moral geography, as the variability is overtly discussed and evaluated. To test whether and how this usage occurs, I qualitatively examined how the toponym is used in public discourse. I examined this usage through a small case study of a body of newspaper articles written by Bill McClellan, a longtime local columnist for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. Over the course of twenty years (2002-2022), McClellan made consistent reference to *Missouree* and *Missourah* in his columns on state politics.

Using the Access World News database (NewsBank, Inc. 2022), I searched the *Post-Dispatch* archives for all instances of *Missouri* using a folk spelling indicative of pronunciation. Searches included “Missouree”, “Missourah”, and “Missouruh”. *Missourah* and *Missouruh* both represent the schwa-final variant that I have called *Missourah* thus far; while I will continue to discuss this variant as *Missourah* in the abstract, I will maintain the author’s spelling when providing quotes in the results below. The search for the three spellings yielded a total of 80 hits with one or more of these (25 *Missouree*, 70 *Missourah*, 7 *Missouruh*); however, this number is inclusive of duplicate results. Because McClellan was the author of the largest set of these results, I downloaded every McClellan article that contained one of the spellings (n=12 articles in total). I first considered the functional use of these toponym variants, and coded whether they were used as a shorthand way of discussing how people pronounce Missouri, as toponyms distinguishing physical space, or as something else. I then considered the surrounding context and looked for evidence that a value had been associated with the variant. Where found, I manually extracted evaluations (e.g., “cosmopolitan”), activities (e.g., hunting), and other valuable contextual information. These were grouped by the variant they occurred with, and then subdivided by the value the contextual information referenced. Following researchers who have found binary contrasts in moral geographies (Sicoli 2016; Modan 2007; Hill 1995; Hoëm 1993), I focused particularly on whether any values associated with the variants could be classified under opposing axes of contrast (Modan 2007). I interpreted the use of multiple axes of contrast to constitute evidence of use in constructing a moral geography.

Results

As noted, a broader examination of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* archives did turn up additional examples not authored by McClellan. These examples included occasional uses by other authors as well as letters to the editor from readers. However, McClellan produced the bulk of the examples during the time period under consideration. This means that any claims regarding the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* writ large would be skewed by McClellan’s own viewpoint. At the same time, expanding the examination to more general corpus or internet searches may find more examples, but at the expense of less context and information about the authors being available. I therefore suggest that McClellan’s work, while not comprising a fully exhaustive set of examples, is most useful as an illustrative case study both because of his relatively high rate of using *Missouree*/*Missourah* in writing as well as because it provides an opportunity to more deeply explore one language user’s understanding of the two variants.

In the results reported below, I first illustrate how McClellan utilizes the variants, and then show how they are used to index values. Such a narrow focus on McClellan’s work does mean that the generalizability of these results is lessened, as all they will show is how one writer uses *Missouree*/*Missourah* with no guarantee that others do as well. That said, McClellan’s work is read and understood by his editors and audience alike; any usage of the variants must reflect conceptions within the community to at least some degree. Along those lines, it is important to note that McClellan’s usage will reflect but one perspective: his political views, which are likely shared in part or whole with an audience of white, middle-class St. Louisans who overwhelmingly favor use of the *Missouree* variant in their own speech (cf. Lance 2003, 277). Moral geographies and the language used to construct them can change over time and vary synchronically between people with differing values (Schieffelin 2014). Therefore, even if we find that *Missouree* and *Missourah* are used to construct a moral geography, the results will only be illustrative in a general sense for the study of toponymy, as they will show that this is a use of toponyms available to language users. However, they should not necessarily be taken as a conclusive picture of use of *Missouri* for all speakers. This is certainly the case for Missourians at large, as those who favor the *Missourah* variant will potentially disagree with the values associated with each variant. At the same time, the nature of the narrow case study means that even if McClellan constructs a moral geography with these variants, further work would be necessary to show this is a fully productive practice among St. Louisans.

Missouri Variants as Place Names

McClellan's use of *Missouree* and *Missourah* changed over the course of a decade (Table 1). In his earliest usage, the two variants are clearly labels referencing the pronunciation of *Missouri*: "If you say *Missouree*, you probably voted yes. If you say *Missouruh*, you probably voted no" (McClellan 2002). He is engaged in talk about talk, and his column offers an evaluation of people who use *Missourah*.

Table 1. Usage of Missouri variants by Bill McClellan over time

Functional Use of <i>Missouri</i> Variants in Column	Instantiation
St. Louis vs. Outstate mapped onto pronunciation	2002
<i>Missouree</i> and <i>Missourah</i> as distinct toponyms, unclear what space they label	2005a
Toponyms refer to physical geography	2011a
Conceding nuance in toponymy	2011b
Toponyms solely refer to an abstract geography	All since 2013

However, in all subsequent uses from 2005 to present, the variants are used as place names, and *Missouree* and *Missourah* refer to distinct places. In such usage, people are referred to as being "in" or "from" one of the variants (McClellan 2005b, 2011a). The usage of the variants as place names is made quite clear in a reference to the same vote as in the 2002 article: "*Missouree* voted overwhelmingly for Proposition B and *Missouruh* voted against it" (McClellan 2011b). As seen, any reference to the variants being a matter of pronunciation is no longer present.

It is unclear at first whether these toponyms refer to distinct physical spaces. This question is resolved over the span of a week in March 2011. As is the case throughout the United States, Missouri's political voting patterns largely follow an urban/rural divide, with the major metropolitan areas of St. Louis and Kansas City generally supporting the Democratic Party and rural areas generally supporting the Republican Party. In his March 7, 2011, column, McClellan proposes that due to this political polarization, St. Louis and Kansas City, which are respectively located on the eastern and western borders of the state, secede from Missouri. McClellan suggests that the rump Missouri, which is mostly rural and therefore on the whole votes Republican, be renamed *Missourah*. This line of reasoning implicitly claims that the cities, by contrast, comprise *Missouree*. Because he is writing for a St. Louis newspaper, he focuses in greater detail on what the border between *Missouree* and *Missourah* would look like in eastern Missouri. He suggests this is effectively a border between St. Louis and *Missourah*. McClellan offers a north-south extension of Brentwood Boulevard, a road in St. Louis County which runs through predominantly white, middle-class, inner-ring suburbs (Best Neighborhood), as an appropriate border (McClellan 2011a).

McClellan's map placed much of Greater St. Louis in *Missourah*, and readers from these parts of the region contested this geography. His next column notes, "There was much disagreement about that. Blue pockets west of Brentwood wanted to be gerrymandered into [St. Louis]. Some people suggested a demilitarized zone extending from Brentwood [west] to Lindbergh Boulevard" (McClellan 2011b). In effect, McClellan was forced to concede nuance in locating *Missouree* and *Missourah*. If one distinguishes the two places by voting preference, one cannot simply draw a border as there are Democratic voters in heavily Republican areas, and vice versa. McClellan himself reached this same conclusion, as evidenced by a May 2013 column in which he parodied the thinking of someone from *Missourah*:

My name is Billy Bob McClellan, and I am proud to be from *Missourah*. I live in the St. Louis region, which happens to be a blue dot in a red state, but I mind my own business. [...] (McClellan 2013a)

If, as in this excerpt, one can live in *Missourah* while residing in St. Louis, there is no easily definable physical boundary between it and *Missouree* (contra the original border proposed in McClellan's 2011a column). Along this reasoning, it would seem that the two places are located in states of mind rather than physical spaces. In acknowledging readers' contestation of his border and adopting the view that a border between the places cannot in fact be easily drawn, McClellan's evolving usage of the two variants appears to settle on using them as distinct place names that nonetheless refer to the same physical space.

Axes of Contrast Between Missouri Variants

The exploration of McClellan’s usage of the *Missouri* variants showed that political leaning was one way of distinguishing *Missouree* and *Missourah*. While this is one clear axis of contrast between the variants, as I will show below, there are several values clearly associated with each variant. That is, political orientation is but one of several axes of contrast that delineate the moral boundary between the two places. It is important to note that McClellan is consistent in application of these values: if he associates a value with *Missouree* in one article, he does not reassign that value to *Missourah* in future work. These associations appear to be rooted in more fixed indexical links between the variants and the values described below. McClellan’s consistency here is particularly interesting because, as shown above, his usage of the two variants as toponyms has evolved over time.

The excerpts in Table 2 illustrate the political dimension of contrasting values. Given that McClellan writes about local politics, one might expect that the Democratic/Republican contrast is the most important to him. However, his discussion of specific issues often contrasts *Missouree*/*Missourah* without making reference to partisan identity. For example, McClellan places *Missouree* and *Missourah* on opposing sides of statewide referenda on puppy mills and a cigarette tax. While these are political issues, McClellan does not suggest that one party or the other supports/opposes these. Rather, he suggests that there is a correct position on these issues. One should support regulating dog breeders, and one should support a cigarette tax. Thus, *Missouree* is in the right and *Missourah* in the wrong. This contrast in correctness, separate from partisan affiliation, is made most clear in his discussion of a 2021 speech by the governor, in which McClellan suggests that *Missourah* would have supported the Confederacy in the American Civil War and opposed women’s suffrage.

Table 2. Contrasting *Missouree* and *Missourah* along a political dimension.

Theme	Text	McClellan Column
Partisanship		
	And Missouree was always out of step with Missouruh. In 1860, Missouree voted for Abraham Lincoln and Missouruh went for Stephen Douglas, who carried the state. Sort of like 2008 when Missouree voted for Barack Obama and Missouruh went for John McCain, who carried the state.	2011b
	Party labels don’t mean so much anymore. Really? Run for office in the city as a Republican or out-state as a Democrat. [. . .] No matter what polls say, that “D” behind your name on the ballot is a real liability in Missourah.	2022
Correctness		
	[T]he cigarette tax was not a partisan issue. Nor did it have much to do with socioeconomic levels. Instead, it turned out to be a geographical thing. The St. Louis area favored the tax. Outstate voters were against it. If you say Missouree, you probably voted yes. If you say Missouruh, you probably voted no. Why is that?	2002
	[The Puppy Mill Cruelty Prevention Act] narrowly passed in November. It had great support in St. Louis and Kansas City. Rural Missouri opposed it. It is important to note that this was not a partisan vote. It had more to do with pronunciation. People in Missouruh opposed it. People in Missouree supported it.	2011a
	But it wasn’t the rift in presidential preferences that signaled our split. It’s been the Puppy Mill deal. Missouree voted overwhelmingly for Proposition B and Missouruh voted against it. It narrowly passed, and now the legislators from Missouruh are undoing the will of Missouree in the Legislature.	2011b
	We are not that state anymore. In fact, I’m quite sure that a solid majority of the Missourians who heard the governor’s recent speech did not think—like I did—that it was an awkwardly worded tribute to the [Suffragettes]. In most of Missourah, they heard the speech and thought: ‘The governor is doing it again. He’s putting truth to power. First, the wrong team wins the Civil War, and then women get the vote. We have known some rough times’.	2021

At the same time, the excerpts in Table 2 make clear that there is more to the contrast in values between the two variants. Another dimension of the contrast relates to geographic orientation (Table 3). One such contrast is regional: *Missouree* aligns with the North of the US, while *Missourah* aligns with the South. At the same time, the variants index urbanness, with *Missouree* and *Missourah* on opposite sides of the urban/rural divide. While urbanness is in part indexed through reference to “city slickers”, the examples in Table 3 show that McClellan also goes further than this in one column, going so far as to suggest that people aligned with rural *Missourah* have a racialized antipathy toward urban St. Louis.

Table 3. Contrasting *Missouree* and *Missourah* by geographic orientation.

Theme	Text	McClellan Column
Urbanness		
	The state auditor spent most of her career in Kansas City before moving to the St. Louis area. But this summer when she announced her run for the U.S. Senate, she did so at the McCaskill and Son feed mill that her family once owned in Texas County. That's because the folks in <i>Missourah</i> will not vote for a city slicker from <i>Missouree</i> .	2005b
	You're not going to need my help out-state. All you have to do is let those people know that St. Louis and St. Louis County don't want this and those out-staters will get up early to vote for it. I understand you're thinking of tossing a little race into it. Always a good idea. You're going to remind the good people of <i>Missourah</i> that the state of Michigan had to step in and bail Detroit out of bankruptcy. Those “urban” leaders in St. Louis just can't govern themselves. If the outstaters don't want to bail out St. Louis, they better vote for the merger.	2019
Region		
	It might seem strange for a university to change conferences only because of the football team, but that's the Yankee way of looking at things. In the SEC, we'd say that the football team is changing conferences and the university is tagging along. <i>Missourah</i> is finally a happy place.	2011c
	<i>Missouree</i> and <i>Missourah</i> have been uneasy partners ever since the Missouri Compromise of 1820 made us sort of a free state, sort of a slave state. Then the actual Civil War came along and we couldn't figure out which side we were supposed to be on.	2012

The final dimension of the contrast between *Missouree* and *Missourah* in McClellan's articles is cultural (Table 4). This dimension encompasses several related themes of being cultured (including distinct cultural interests), valuing education, and being cosmopolitan. It is primarily constructed through the description of *Missourah* as uncultured, uneducated, unsophisticated, etc. Such a description is meant to imply that *Missourah* lacks the values held in *Missouree*. For example, McClellan's (2015) discussion of a political candidate who died tragically that year notes that it is difficult to be sophisticated and highly educated in *Missourah*, with the unwritten assertion that it must be easier to do so in *Missouree*. Likewise, suggesting that *Missourah* opposes teaching evolution positions *Missourah* as uneducated, and *Missouree* as educated by extension. His 2011 discussion of the then-governor includes an accusation of simpleness: rural people in *Missourah* will vote based on whether the candidate panders to their interests in hunting and fishing (something which urbanites in *Missouree* would never do, of course).

Table 4. Contrasting *Missouree* and *Missourah* by cultural values.

Theme	Text	McClellan Column
Culture	<p>Meanwhile, the poor governor, who has to run next year in both Missouree and Missouruh, has gone fishing. Got himself a trout. Before that, he went hunting. Got himself a deer. And I don't blame him. We are a divided state. If you please Missouree, you anger Missouruh. And vice versa. We wouldn't even be able to agree on whom to root for in <i>Deliverance</i>.</p> <p>My name is Billy Bob McClellan, and I am proud to be from Missourah. I live in the St. Louis region, which happens to be a blue dot in a red state, but I mind my own business and git along just fine with most of my neighbors. Sometimes we speak a different language, that's all. They talk about their houses. I talk about my compound. But for the most part, we git along just fine. I was generally happy with the work of the Missourah Legislature this last session. I would give them an A-minus. I was relieved that the legislators saved us from United Nations Rule 21, or whatever it was. You know the one I'm talking about. We was all going to have to git sustainable. I'm not sure what that means, but I don't want some U.N. bureaucrat defining it. (Bold is my emphasis)</p>	<p>2011a</p> <p>2013a</p>
Education	<p>I'd like to make mention of the nickname that [Indiana] University uses—Hoosiers. I mean, come on now! How is that supposed to make Missourah legislators feel? They've got enough on their plates what with the budget troubles and all the darned liberals who want to teach evolution and so forth.</p>	2005a
Cosmopolitanism	<p>Schweich was a sophisticated, Harvard law grad who once worked at the United Nations. That's a heavy chain to drag through Missourah.</p>	2015

McClellan's (2013a) parody of someone from *Missourah* is of particular interest. One method McClellan uses to position the character as clearly unsophisticated, uncultured, and uneducated is to adopt non-standard linguistic features. I suggest that the non-standard linguistic features evoke a stereotype of an uneducated rural speaker, and there is certainly an element of class at play as well.

Summary

There are two key findings from the above analysis of McClellan's writing. The first is that *Missouree* and *Missourah* are clearly used as toponyms that refer to different places. Although the places are different, they do not appear to be clearly distinguished by physical geography. Instead, the second key finding is that McClellan's writing constructs *Missouree* and *Missourah* as two places valued at opposing ends of several axes of contrast along cultural, geographic, and political dimensions (Table 5).

Table 5. Axes of contrast between *Missouree*/*Missourah*

	Missouree	Missourah
Cultural values	<p>cosmopolitan</p> <p>cultured</p> <p>educated</p>	<p>unsophisticated/simple</p> <p>uncultured</p> <p>uneducated</p>
Geographic orientation	<p>urban</p> <p>Northern</p>	<p>rural</p> <p>Southern</p>

Political values	
Democratic	Republican
right on issues	wrong on issues

Discussion and Conclusion

Like Modan (2007) finds with respect to a neighborhood in Washington, DC, I find clear axes of contrast that construct a binary opposition between *Missouree* and *Missourah*. This binary contrast is indicative of a moral geography in which *Missouree* and *Missourah* occupy different moral spaces.⁴ In McClellan's evaluation of the values outlined above, *Missouree* is in a generally positive space, with *Missourah* in a negative moral space. In this sense, residents of *Missouree* are framed as sharing McClellan and his readers' values, unlike residents of *Missourah*. This finding reaffirms that toponyms can have an associative meaning connected to moral values (cf. Ameen & Ainiala 2018; Basso 1996). Beyond this, however, this finding establishes that toponym usage itself constitutes a spatio-discursive practice for situating and labeling abstract places within a value system. *Missouree* and *Missourah* are clearly place names in the usage described here, and it is precisely their function as names that is being used discursively. It is important to reiterate that this spatio-discursive practice is likely not shared by all speakers who are aware of the different variants. McClellan's writing is for and in conversation with a community of readers who share several commonalities, most prominently including their ties to St. Louis and their overwhelming use of the *Missouree* variant (recalling Lance 2003, 277). Users of *Missourah*, as well as users of *Missouree* who do not share McClellan's values, may contest the moral geography that he creates.

Unlike in the cases described by Basso (1996), in which a single geographical location is given a single place name that situates it physically and morally, the sociolinguistic variants here contrast solely with respect to the values that are distributed in moral space. Physical geography is in fact trivial, since these toponyms appear to refer to the same space (cf. Van de Putte 2021). After all, McClellan could (and does in other columns) use *Missouri* to make an unvalued reference to the state. The primary function of using the folk spellings *Missouree* and *Missourah* as toponyms is in labeling spaces within the moral geography. I therefore suggest that these are moral toponyms: place names which label moral space. As this label suggests, moral toponyms are distinguished from other toponyms not because they are different kinds of names than traditional toponyms, but because their role is to label space in another kind of human geography (cf. Gammeltoft 2016).

If we take moral toponyms to be a distinct category of toponym, we should reconsider our understanding of place names which situate a space both physically and morally. These are essentially dual roles; *Missourah*, for example, both labels the US state and is a negative moral space (for McClellan and his readers, at least). While we could take this to mean that a single toponym takes on several roles—labeling, evaluation, etc.—I suggest instead that such names are in fact homophonous toponyms. That is, the /i/-final variant of *Missouri* and *Missouree* are homophonous, as are the schwa-final variant of *Missouri* and *Missourah*. For these pairs, one of the homophonous toponyms is a traditional toponym labeling the space. For *Missouri*, this is the toponym that displays sociolinguistic variation in which *Missouree* or *Missourah* mean the same thing because they each label the geographic entity. The other toponym in the pair is a moral toponym which links the space to a value system. For *Missouri*, this is where we have *Missouree* and *Missourah* labeling distinct moral spaces. Taking traditional and moral toponyms to be effectively different names would imply that speakers could use the place name in one role but not the other. This seems correct to me. For example, a speaker could give directions to a location in which they pronounce the location's name one way or another, without intending to evoke values associated with the pronunciation of that place name.

Because he spells *Missouree*/*Missourah* distinctly from *Missouri*, McClellan's usage of these names illustrates how moral toponyms may be distinct from toponyms that label physical space. As noted, McClellan uses *Missouri* to make an unvalued reference to the state (n=1399 in a search of Access World News). Outside of the many instances in which the name is a part of a larger name (*University of Missouri*, *Missouri Baptist Medical Center*, etc.) or locating a small town (e.g., *Eolia, Missouri*), there appear to be several hundred such uses of *Missouri* as its own toponym throughout his writing. This usage is much more common than his use of *Missouree*/*Missourah*. It reads as not indexing values, and crucially, simply making reference to the space. This is the traditional toponym; regardless of how a reader pronounces the name in conversation or while reading, the column is referring to the geographic entity. If this is quantitatively the primary way by which McClellan refers to the state, when does he use *Missouree*/*Missourah*? Although he does not offer any intuitions regarding the names specifically, in one column (McClellan 2013b), he explains his past authorial intent:

In the past, I've written about St. Louis' seceding from Missouri. We'll join Illinois as West East St. Louis. **Those columns were written in fun**, and I have received good-natured comments from readers in St. Charles. Please go, they say, and if you do secede, make the new boundary the Missouri River. (Bold is my emphasis)

The columns that were "written in fun" include some of the *Missouree*/*Missourah* columns explored above. By distinguishing these columns from others, McClellan seems to be pointing to them and the content within having a different function from his other columns. Note that in the quote here, McClellan uses *Missouri* where he previously used *Missouree*/*Missourah*. His usage of the toponyms in question therefore appears to be part of writing a column "in fun". In other words, the function of *Missouree*/*Missourah* for McClellan is different from the function of *Missouri*. Rather than being traditional toponyms, these are moral toponyms, used creatively in an evaluative manner as part of a satirical column.

Given their indexical links, it is worth considering how *Missouree* and *Missourah* came to adopt their associative meanings linked to the values in Table 5. McClellan's description of a rivalry between *Missouree* and *Missourah* dating back to the American Civil War is inaccurate with respect to the history of variability in production of the name. As noted previously, *Missourah* was covariable with *Missouree* in the 19th century, and variation was crucially conditioned by education level but not regional affiliation (Read 1933). As the American Civil War took place during this period, there is no evidence of the variants being associated with sides in the conflict. Furthermore, *Missouree*'s widespread use appears to date from only the 20th century (Lance 2003). This suggests that any link between the two names and the Civil War are effectively a folk etymology; there is no direct link between the variants and the event of the Civil War. Instead, the values McClellan assigns to the two places are drawn from existing indexical relations and point to the dialectical relation between higher- and lower-order indexicalities (Johnstone et al. 2006; Silverstein 2003). That the values assigned to the two places derive from existing indexical relations is clearest with respect to the urban/rural divide. Urban areas initially led rural areas in adoption of the *Missouree* variant, which established an association between the urban and the *Missouree* variant on one hand and the rural and the *Missourah* variant on the other. The variants subsequently came to index urban/ruralness (Lance 2003). This indexical relation paved the way for the variants as place names to be associated with these opposing characteristics. Perhaps less clearly, the contrast between *Missouree* being right and *Missourah* being wrong regarding political issues appears to be drawn from the prescriptive norm in which *Missouree* is the correct variant and *Missourah* the incorrect variant.

This pathway from lower-order indexical relation to moral toponym is suggestive of a route for developing moral toponyms beyond *Missouree*/*Missourah*. Any toponym which indexes a social category that can be valued is able to develop this indexical relation into a positioning in moral space. Because sociolinguistic variation quite often ends up indexing values in this manner (cf. Scott 2016; Eckert 2008), sociolinguistic variants of toponyms are prime candidates to develop into moral toponyms. However, sociolinguistic variation in production does not necessarily need to be the only toponymic situation in which moral toponyms are developed. If a space has multiple names, each could be associated with a different indexical field, and thus label a different moral space. For example, the viewpoint outlined here can contribute to the understanding of how unofficial toponyms associate with place- and group-based identities (Vuolteenaho et al. 2019). Likewise, renaming a place due to political changes (Fabiszak et al. 2021), to commemorate a person or event (Alderman 1996), or as part of a postcolonial project (Stolz & Warnke 2016) could jumpstart the development of moral toponyms, as a new name would be intentionally linked to a set of values or ideologies. In this sense, the new toponym would double as a traditional toponym labeling the space and a moral toponym situating the space as advocating the values of the namer. At the same time, however, the prior toponym could become associated with countervailing ideologies by those opposed to the change of name and social change it represents. Such an outcome could lead to usage of the new and prior toponyms acting to label moral space, much like the outcome demonstrated for sociolinguistic variants above.

This novel category of toponym indicates that as a general point, toponymic research from a socio-onomastic perspective should consider both the role of the toponym and the kind of geography it operates over as part of the study of the social link between the label and the place. In addition, the generalizability of this phenomenon in larger datasets is worthy of future study, with respect to both *Missouri* in particular (Is McClellan's usage shared by others in St. Louis and beyond? Are there competing moral geographies constructed around these variants?) and to other toponyms (Is the use of moral toponyms a general onomastic phenomenon?).

Notes

¹ I take the two variants here to be true variants of the place name, as they are used in regular speech. These contrast with *Misery*, another potential variant given by speakers. Unlike *Missouree* and *Missourah*, *Misery* is not used in regular speech but solely as a play on words, relying on the similarity in pronunciation between *Missouree* and *misery*. Further discussion of this usage is beyond the scope of this paper.

² For information on the etymology of *Missouri*, see McCafferty 2012; McCafferty 2003; Lance 1999.

³ See Labov et al. 2006, for an overview of variation in vowel production within Missouri.

⁴ A reviewer quite rightly points out that not all sociolinguistic variables are binary (indeed, as pointed out by Lance 2003, this has been true in the past for *Missouri* itself), and asks what we would find for a variable with more than two variants. Given the nature of *Missouree*/*Missourah* variation in public discourse, this question is beyond the scope of this paper, although it is certainly worthy of some speculation. I would note that any number of sociolinguistic variants can come to index values, and the indexical field associated with a given variant does not need to be entirely oppositional to another (Eckert 2008). Given this, I would speculate that three or more toponymic variants could come to be associated with distinct sets of values and thus label distinct moral spaces. In this sense, the binary patterning discussed here would be a special case that arises when two variants exist. However, it would be useful to extend the moral geography approach by exploring a case with more than two variants, particularly because linguistic anthropological uses of the concept rely heavily on a binary set of competing values (cf. Modan 2007).

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