

Heceta: A Name With a Split Personality

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I^N 1775, just thirty years before Lewis and Clark made their historic journey to the Pacific Northwest, a Spanish sea captain, Bruno Heceta, sailing up the Pacific coast of North America in the corvette *Santiago*, sighted the rugged coast below present-day Tillamook, Oregon, and recorded his impressions thereof in his diary.¹ Today two landmarks on the Oregon coast bear his name — *Heceta Head* and *Heceta Beach*. Moreover, the bold sentinel which stands on *Heceta Head* is widely known as *Heceta Head Lighthouse* or simply as *Heceta Head Light*. In addition, the marine shelf which lies some thirty miles off the headland is known to navigators as *Heceta Bank*.

But for two quite different pronunciations now current for *Heceta* within a relatively small area, we might rapidly pass over the names *Heceta Head* and *Heceta Beach*, since the naming of landmarks after explorers and navigators follows a common pattern. These two distinct pronunciations for *Heceta*, prevailing not only along the Oregon coast but generally throughout the state, are [h'e'sitə] and [h'ekətə]. Each is used widely by a large group of native speakers, there being also those speakers who use both pronunciations. In addition, the Castilian pronunciation of *Heceta* is sometimes cited as a third possibility;² any such pronunciation, however, must be dismissed as an amusing pedantry having no place, except historical, in a toponymic analysis.

Traditionally the name *Heceta* (also written *Hezeta* in older documents) is pronounced [e'θeta] in Castile; in Southern Spain and throughout Hispanic America it is usually pronounced [e'seta]. It is common knowledge that throughout Spanish-speaking America

¹ Robert Greenhow, *The History of Oregon and California* (New York and Philadelphia, 1845), pp. 430–433. — H. H. Bancroft, *History of the Northwest Coast*, vol. XXVII of *Works* (San Francisco, 1884), I, 158 ff.

² "Spanish Heritage," *The Sunday Oregonian* (Portland, Oregon), Jan. 6, 1957, Northwest Rotogravure Magazine, p. 8.

the Castilian "ceceo" has given way to "seseo." The effect of this phenomenon is reflected everywhere in this hemisphere in the pronunciation — not only by South Americans but also by North Americans — of such names as *San Francisco*, *El Cerrito*, *Santa Cruz*, and countless others.

Following the normal pattern of Anglicization of Spanish names in North America one would indeed expect *Heceta* to be pronounced [hɛ'sitə], or [hə'sitə], the aspiration of the initial letter representing a normal development because of the undeniably strong influence of the printed word. Such a pronunciation, as has already been noted, is widely used by one group of native speakers; many of these are to be found in and about Florence, a small community situated just off the southern end of *Heceta Beach*. However, it is to be noted that *Heceta Head*, lying about twelve miles to the north of Florence, is commonly known as [ˈhɛkətə ˈhɛd], especially by those living nearby. Similarly *Heceta Head Lighthouse* (or *Heceta Head Light*) generally reflects the latter pronunciation in this region. It is interesting to note that the men and officers of the United States Coast Guard Station located at *Heceta Head* endorse only the pronunciation [ˈhɛkətə] and regard [hɛ'sitə] as quite improper.

Moreover, there are those inhabiting the area who regularly refer to [ˈhɛkətə ˈhɛd] on the one hand and to [hɛ'sitə ˈbitʃ] on the other. A case in point is a native informant who — living and operating a grocery store midway between the headland and the beach — regularly makes this careful distinction between the two. It is only fair to state that most native inhabitants do not make such a close distinction; most speakers settle on one pronunciation or the other for both landmarks.

No serious writer will deny the existence of these two variant pronunciations for *Heceta*. The problem of determining local preferences remains. No well-defined isogloss delimiting two distinct areas is apparent; one can say only that the pronunciation [ˈhɛkətə] seems to be favored in the northern portion of this area, whereas [hɛ'sitə] tends to prevail in the southern portion. In Oregon at large both pronunciations are widely heard; for the most part any preference for one form or the other is an individual matter. Finally, those Oregonians who are not intimately acquainted with the Oregon coast and who know the name *Heceta* mainly from their reading will know it only as [hɛ'sitə] or something similar.

It is not surprising to learn that various popular commentators have felt constrained to make occasional pronouncements concerning the dual pronunciation of the name *Heceta*. Many of these statements are ill-advised and naive and thus are often more confusing than informative. Even in the definitive book on Oregon place names one reads the following statement:

The name Heceta is frightfully mispronounced on some parts of the Oregon coast, where it is called *Heketa*, with a strong accent on the first syllable. In Castilian the pronunciation would be *Ay-thay-tah*, with the accent on the second syllable. This sound is a little difficult for Oregonians, most of whom seem to have Anglicized the word into *Heseta*, with the accent on the second syllable. Doubtless that style will prevail.³

To say that the name is "frightfully mispronounced" by those who use it most in their workaday vocabulary is to deny English the right to Anglicize, or is to doubt that right; or to say that *Heceta*, as pronounced in Spain or in Castile, is a "little difficult for Oregonians" is to fail to recognize the great power of the English tongue — or of any dynamic language — to assimilate into itself words and names whencesoever they come. It is this very adaptability — stemming, in part at least, from two great currents of tradition, Anglo-Saxon and Romance, flowing side by side in modern English — which has contributed so much toward making it one of the world's great languages.⁴ However a pronunciation such as [ˈhɛkətə] may grate upon the ear of the purist, it behooves the onomatologist to record his findings impassionately and without bias, employing accurate linguistic methods and basing his studies on sound historic and phonological principles. Let us not rule out [ˈhɛkətə] as a valid form simply because a native of Spain or Hispanic America would fail to recognize in it the name of Captain Bruno Heceta, sometime navigator to the Spanish crown.

As a final task it devolves upon the onomatologist to determine how or suggest reasons why an aberrant form such as [ˈhɛkətə] ever arose and became so widespread. As far as this name is concerned, we have very little data other than the fact itself; therefore, any explanation will be based upon conjecture.

³ Lewis A. McArthur, *Oregon Geographic Names* (3rd ed.; Portland, Oregon, 1952), pp. 293–294.

⁴ As I write this, there comes to mind that excellent series of studies entitled *The Great Languages*, edited by William J. Entwistle and published by Faber & Faber, Ltd., of London.

It has already been suggested that initial [h] in the Anglicized pronunciation of the name *Heceta* derives from the strong influence of the written word. The shift of stress from the second to the first syllable offers no problem, as this phenomenon occurs very frequently in English. One need think only of the name *Florida*, which Ponce de León called [flo'riða] and which we English-speaking Americans today call ['flərədə] or ['flarədə]. Further, the reduction of the two remaining vowels to [ə] follows a pattern which is characteristic of English. The real stumbling block in the form ['hɛkətə] is the sound [k]; its presence cannot be explained by the operation of phonetic principles. Nor can the vagaries of English spelling be offered as a satisfactory explanation; in modern English orthography *c* occurring before *i* or *e* is rarely pronounced [k]. Thus Kenyon and Knott do not cite a single word beginning with *ci-* or *ce-* as being pronounced with [k]; even the word *Celt*, when so spelled, is assigned but one pronunciation [sɛlt], whereas [kɛlt] is listed as the only pronunciation for *Kelt*.⁵

When all is said and done, the name *Heceta* pronounced with [k] instead of [s] seems strange indeed. One might charge this pronunciation simply to local caprice; this is the easy way out but it is hardly satisfying. It would seem that an explanation should be sought elsewhere. Is it possible that the name *Heceta* was confused with another? Perhaps the answer is to be found here. When we examine the coastline of the Pacific Northwest, we find that there exists a *Hecate Strait* several hundred miles to the north of *Heceta Head*, lying between the Queen Charlotte Islands and the mainland of British Columbia. The name *Heceta* — to be derived ultimately from Gk. Ἑκάτη, one of the lesser deities — is generally pronounced ['hɛkətɪ] or ['hɛkətə].⁶ To assume that *Heceta* in Oregon was confused with *Hecate* in British Columbia seems at first a difficult step to take, since very few Oregonians except fishermen or seamen know of the existence of *Hecate Strait*. If the names were confused, it would seem that such confusion first took place among those who were best acquainted with both areas — fishermen, seamen, shipmasters, and the like. Does this account for the fact that ['hɛkətə]

⁵ *A Pronouncing Dictionary of American English* (Springfield, Mass., 1951), pp. 74, 242.

⁶ In Shakespeare and other early English writers *Hecate* is usually to be pronounced ['hɛkɪt].

is today the only accepted pronunciation for *Heceta* among the coast guardsmen and lighthouse keepers of Oregon's *Heceta Head*? I shall not attempt to answer the question. Or is one to assume that some shipmaster or lighthouse keeper, or perhaps some local teacher or preacher, knew his Greek — or for that matter his *Macbeth* — better than he did his Spanish or his *Quixote*? Again, there is no answer. The fact remains that *Heceta*, when pronounced [ˈhɛkətə], is as strange to the English-trained eye as the spelling which Daniel Boone employed when, after one of his early exploits, he carved his name upon a certain tree informing any and all who should pass by that he had “cilled a bar” thereon — doubtless prouder of his prowess as a hunter than of his accuracy as a speller.⁷

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⁷ For the benefit of the foreign reader not acquainted with the almost legendary feats of Daniel Boone, this is to be interpreted as “killed a bear.”

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