The Routledge Handbook of Ecolinguistics

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Ecolinguistics and Placenames

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Ecolinguistics and Placenames
Interaction Between Humans and Nature

Joshua Nash

Definitions and Historical Perspectives

Onomastics investigates the history, nature and use of proper names. Place-naming, or toponymy, is a sub-field of onomastics concerned specifically with the study of place-names. This branch of scholarship straddles several fields of scientific research, including linguistics, history, cartography, geography and anthropology. Although examining relationships involving names, naming processes, place and environment would likely appear attractive to ecolinguists and the consideration of human–environment–language interactions, toponymy within the scope of ecolinguistics has not received much explicit attention. To my knowledge, apart from anthropological linguist Edward Sapir's (1912) article 'Language and environment' and Peter Mühlhäusler's (n.d.) direct statements about placenames in an unpublished manuscript about creating ecological links through language, my study of Norfolk Island (South Pacific) and Dudley Peninsula (South Australia) toponymy is the only work to have been explicitly labeled ecolinguistics (Nash, 2013). I incorporate examples of Norfolk Island and Dudley Peninsula placenames throughout.

'Toponym' and 'placename' are synonyms. Like other linguistic domains, which have been of marginal concern to general linguistics, toponymic analyses are compatible with an examination of the interaction involving humans, language, nature and the environment. Toponyms, either mapped or unmapped, are linguistic pinpricks, entrance points into language represented *in* landscape. Several placenames in the same language can describe a single place, and places may have both official and unofficial names, e.g., the official 'Glenelg' and the unofficial 'The Bay' (for Holdfast Bay) in suburban Adelaide (Australia). The endonym (internal name) 'Bhārat' in Hindi is the exonym (external name) 'India' in English and endonymic 'København' in Danish is exonymic 'Copenhague' in French.

Ecolinguistics provides several questions relevant to toponymy. The one I detail in this chapter is: How can relationships implicating people, language, place and names be measured empirically in and through toponyms? Work into empirical investigations and philosophical speculations regarding the relationship between lexicon and environmental description is key to ecolinguistics. Linguistic form like toponyms are significant in their ability to contribute to understanding specific aspects of particular linguistic ecologies.

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The names *Norfolk Island* and the colloquial *The Rock* are different in form and in what they signify.

There is a distinct gap in linguistics and toponymy of a method and theory which outlines how, along with formal structural analysis, the ecological implications of toponyms and their connection to the nexus of place where they develop and exist should proceed. Such an approach should not only emphasize the efficacy of structural analysis but also accentuate the multitude of cultural and ecological parameters necessary to consider when conducting an ecolinguistic analysis of toponyms. I reflect briefly on elements relevant to this ecolinguistic consideration of toponymy. These reflections are based mainly on my linguistic fieldwork conducted on Norfolk Island where Norfolk, the Norfolk Island language and English are spoken. Both languages are used in Norfolk Island toponymy.

Sapir (1912: 231) illustrates how history may be reflected in toponyms:

> [O]nly the student of language history is able to analyse such names as Essex, Norfolk, and Sutton into their component elements as east saxon, north folk, and south town, while to the lay consciousness these names are etymological units as purely as are "butter" and "cheese," the contrast between a country inhabited by an historically homogeneous group for a long time, full of etymologically obscure place-names, and a newly settled country with its newtowns, wildwoods, and mill creeks, is apparent.

As one of the early proponents for exploring relationships between language and its bio-cultural environment, Sapir's suggestions about toponymy are still remarkably relevant. In traditional views of linguistic analysis, languages can be studied without any reference to the bio-cultural context in which they are used. They can also be transplanted and used to replace other languages; they are arbitrary codes to express universal cognitive categories. These concepts have been at the heart of the ecolinguistic critique of traditional linguistics. Where the toponym *Red Stone* on Norfolk Island refers to a specific large red-colored rock formation on the island's north coast, the Norfolk expression *do semes Red Stone—lubbe side es* (literally: do as is done with *Red Stone*, leave it where it is), which means in a figurative sense 'just leave it—a thing, an idea, a person—alone, do nothing with it.' Toponyms can become embedded and intertwined in complexes of human and nature interaction.

An ecolinguistic point of view considers toponyms as important cultural and environmental artifacts and events. By having access to toponyms and their histories, toponymic maps and toponymic books or gazetteers, the tapestry of toponymic and topographic contours— names and/in the world—is revealed (cf. Mark et al.'s 2011 volume *Landscape in Language*). Ecolinguistics provides a basis upon which the analysis of this cross-disciplinary mix of linguistic and environmental relationships can be undertaken. The Dudley Peninsula offshore fishing ground name *The Purple Patch* refers to the colloquial expression of having a purple patch, which means to have a run of success of good luck, at the same time as describing the purple seaweed in the ocean's reef structures at that location. The ground is both purpled colored and a great whereabouts to fish.

Analyses taking an ecolinguistic perspective provide a philosophical and conceptual framework for what I believe can result in a more accurate and detailed description of toponyms in more precise contexts. Remote environments provide congenial research situations for observing how languages, other parameters of language, and environments, e.g., the placename lexicon, and means by which speculations as to the evolution of these parameters have changed and evolved over time. Research in such environments is certainly suitable to and could easily be taken up by ecolinguists. In remote locations, placenames are

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not usually open to outsider scope and thus develop their own language and place specific idiosyncrasies. In a language contact environment such as Norfolk Island, a toponym doublet—where two different versions of one name exist for the same place—such the Norfolk *Dem Steps* and the English *The Convict Steps*, a quarried rock area created as a result of the hewing of building materials by convicts, displays explicitly how history, names and places become amalgamated in contested linguistic landscapes.

Critical Issues and Topics and the *How* of Toponymy

Moving on to the specifics of how an ecolinguistically focused toponymy could operate, I consider several ontological and theoretical issues at play in the science of toponymy.

Toponymy has been concerned with the process of writing a placename's biography. The story of a placename can arguably be captured in the five *wh-* questions—*where*, *who*, *when*, *what*, *why*. I believe considering the *how* of toponyms and toponymies, i.e., how placenames are initiated and are operationalized in the world, extends this *wh-* questioning. Because of its open-minded approach, ecolinguistics is able to inculcate many perspectives which would not be typical of more formal toponymic analyses. For example, where toponymic study is usually concerned with three domains of concern—a toponym's identification (technical linguistic and classificatory explanations), a toponym's documentation (source material about a toponym's history), and a toponym's interpretation (the active interpretation of the biography of a toponym based in its most reliable documentation)—ecolinguistics and its related fields can pursue a more refined and specific survey of the ways and means a holistic study of toponymy is able to offer when assessing the operation of toponyms and understanding their active and actual use. Although much of the research I review is not necessarily explicitly labeled *toponymic*, it offers much to reflections on the nature of toponymies.

By considering the relationship between universal and culturally specific phenomena in toponymy, an application of the *how* of toponymy as a method is able to integrate and consider not only phenomena between, within, and across toponymic contexts but also consider what these contexts actually mean. For example, a *wh-* questioning of the technical aspects of a Tahitian language inspired toponym *Fata Fata* in Norfolk can tell a fair bit about what the name is, where it is located, and what its history is. The name exists on Norfolk Island because of the influence of the Polynesian women who went to Pitcairn Island with the *Bounty* mutineers in 1789, the descendants of whom were relocated to Norfolk Island in 1856. *Fata Fata* means an islet in a natural running stream or watercourse, whatever the size in Tahitian. Still, the *how* tells more intricately details of how this name is used in different contexts, what it may mean culturally and how many local Norfolk Islanders remember and narrate stories and pastimes which took place in *Fata Fata*.

There is a corpus of oft-quoted research which examines how toponyms function and behave and some of the actions they perform. Keith Basso's (1988, 1996) work with the Western Apache, Carter's (1988) creative interpretation of spatial history and placenaming, Kari's (2011) study of Ahtna Athabascan geographic knowledge and Myers's (1986: 57) "life-world of constituted meanings" of the Pintupi people in Aboriginal Australia all allude to the *how* of toponyms and toponymy and ways in which these invoked *hows* of toponymy can be collected and analyzed: as cultural deictics (pointers), as toponymic knowledge connected to land and mores and as mappable linguistic history. A toponym like *Horsepiss Bend* (horsepiss < Norfolk 'name of a weed so named because the flowers smell of horse urine when squashed') reveal not only dangerous narratives within Norfolk Island toponymy but also potentially rude linguistic entities. Considering how such placenames explicate

linguistic collaboration, the *how* of these interactions, and the resultant human-language interface must lie at the heart of an ecolinguistic critique of language and place relations.

Research more esoterically connected to toponymy, less explicitly toponymic, and less directed by the *wh-* questions strives, among other things, to unravel how placenames (as language) and world relations operate. Phenomenological and more philosophical takes on toponymy (e.g., Casey, 1996; Dominy, 2001; Gray, 1999; Malpas, 1999, 2007) inculcate an assessment of attributes of landscape vis-à-vis toponymy and how landscape setting and being-in-the-world shape ways in which individuals develop an attachment to place through place-naming processes and toponymy. Using Faeroe Island place-naming and personal inscription of names-as-cultural-landscapes, Gaffin (1996) encourages incorporating more detailed deliberation on the aesthetic and ecological relevance and connectedness of toponyms to place and their importance as markers of insider distinctiveness and cultural belonging. Faeroe Islands fishing ground names like *Shag Bank*, named after the diving cormorant birds which frequent the area, and *Aksal's Spot*, obviously named after Aksal, animate landscapes. Like Dominy, Gaffin asserts the significance of the role toponyms play as spatial descriptors and the importance of considering spatial orientation of names *In Place*, the title of Gaffin's (1996) book, in an ethnographically prompted toponymic analysis.

Although many of these accounts are conceivably attributable to the *how* of toponymy, and although their role in toponymic research may appear peripheral to the brief of ecolinguistics and possibly toponymics in general, there appears to be a possible reconciliation: incorporating the *wh*-questioning with the *how* of toponymy. The coupling of the historically and structurally-driven *where*, *when*, *who*, *what*, and *why* with the *how* analysis of the nuts and bolts of the workings of these *wh*-toponymies highlights the tension between submitting toponyms as arbitrary signifiers as opposed to their constitution and operation in the world as nonarbitrary elements of a lexicon used by people to describe a landscape.

Whether or not the research I have briefly summarized should be labeled ecolinguistics or not is not as critical as realizing and being able to assess the extent such posings and presentations convey toward characterizing the *how* of toponymy. That many of these more obscure slants, and the names given to such fields of inquiry—ethnophysiography, landscape ontology, phenomenology of place—do not fall nicely into quantitative or qualitative toponymy or even mainstream toponymic research at all, does not in any way diminish their importance to the field of toponomastics and an ecolinguistic appreciation of toponymy. In a recent paper in the onomastics journal *Names*, Jan Tent (2015: 72–73) concludes with the following:

> I encourage toponymists to consciously distinguish between the different approaches to toponymy (no matter what labels they may go by), and to engage in more extensive toponymic research. There are many rich and informative stories to be told using this approach.

It is possibly in a state where toponymists learn consciously to distinguish between the different approaches to their discipline while making suppositions about the ways in which label-free outlooks could be attained that the possibility of harmonizing the *wh*-questioning and the *how* of toponymic workings may be achieved. This coordination should undoubtedly be of interest to ecolinguists.

Current Contributions and Research

There have been several recent trends in toponymy which are relevant to ecolinguistic study. The crossover between anthropological linguistic examination of space (e.g., Senft, 1997;

Bennardo, 2002) and ethnophysiography research (e.g., Turk et al., 2011) accentuate principles common to ecolinguistic exploration. For example, describing spatial frames of reference in coastal toponyms, e.g., the landward–seaward distinction and up and down descriptors in hilly topography, build on the ecology of language question relating to whether language contours and environmental contours are comparable. Mark et al.'s (2011) *Landscape in Language* summarizes various culturally and existentially focused takes on language, place, and naming. Such approaches suggest that in an open-minded manner placenames, language in general and ideas of self and environment are all amalgamated in complex relationships which can not only be accessed through fieldwork, e.g., using what I argue can be labeled an ecolinguistic fieldwork methodology, but can be mapped and represented.

It is here toponymy and language documentation from an ecological perspective offer ecolinguistics much. As is the case with many languages for which toponyms are our only remaining record, ecolinguistic analyses should value toponyms for their ability to describe human–nature and human–human interactions diachronically. For example, Cantrill's (2015) and Carbaugh's (1999) slants on environmental communication and their crossover into the domains of storied language in landscape are essentially and implicitly ecolinguistic though not labeled such. The work on the Apache of the late well-known and well-cited American anthropologist Keith Basso (e.g., Basso, 1996) extends the frames of consideration for science and ecolinguistics of how language, culture, and knowing are built upon a strong bedrock of self-in-the-world phenomena. Documented Apache placenames like *Water Flows Inward Under a Cottonwood Tree* and *White Rocks Lie Above in a Compact Cluster* reveal the interconnectedness of an aggregated language and nature worldview seen through the membrane of toponymy.

Taking phenomenology as a starting point and looking back in order to go forward ecolinguistically, we observe that philosophical writers (e.g., Malpas, 2007) have worked intently on posing not only language as an ecological domain but language as an existentially founded and harnessed sphere of being. As such, Malpas's writing and realizations on language-place-work-thought and current trends in landscape in language research (e.g. Thornton, 2011) are particularly pertinent to an ecolinguistic take on toponymy.

Although now somewhat dated, anthropologist Tim Ingold (2000) has offered some of the clearest readings of how anthropology stands on applying concepts of belonging, neighborhood, and group dynamics to more concrete structurally driven spheres such as language and place relationships. Extending Ingold's work to toponymy, which I did recently by observing the realization of fishing ground toponymy on Norfolk Island (Nash and Low, 2014), is an effective method to demonstrate how ecolinguistics can involve and invite many analytical perspectives into a nexus or developed theoretical core.

Considering the inroads the anthropology of place and the linguistics of landscape have made in recent years, e.g., the development of the field of linguistic landscape and its contributions to toponymics and toponomastics (the study of placenames within onomastics), and the swiftness of change within academic disciplines, ecolinguists are in an excellent position not only to observe these changes, but to participate in and contribute to these new developments.

Main Research Methods—Islands and Interaction

In this section I deal specifically with my long-term ecolinguistic field research on islands in Australia and the South Pacific. Engaging in ecolinguistic fieldwork differs from mainstream linguistics in a number of ways. Ecolinguistic field research is seen as long-term

engagement with specific language communities; fieldwork is not restricted to making recordings and linguistic documentation but includes participant observation and participation with the community in, for example, creating language legislation, museum exhibitions and involvement in signage and place name documentation. In an ecolinguistic approach, language documentation and linguistic fieldwork cannot be separated from participating in everyday community activities. This participation may include sharing practical activities with language users such as chopping wood, gardening and planting trees. In these situations where the context of language in use is clear and obvious, excellent data can be obtained. Physical labor and achievements can easily lead to scientific achievements. Many of the lesser known Norfolk placenames I documented such as *Side ar Whale Es* (Place the whale is), *Side Suff*, *Fly Pass* (Place swell flies pass) and *Side Eddie find ar anchor* (Place Eddie found the anchor) were precipitated and discussed during work-based interaction with the locals who knew these places and names.

Because appropriate methodologies of using ecolinguistics in collecting language data have not been explicated to any satisfactory extent, my approach in this chapter has been and continues to be exploratory. Although what I have labeled an ecolinguistic fieldwork methodology shares many similarities with the ethnographic method, I highlight differences and emphasize the importance of ecological and social connectedness in the fieldwork situation in remote and insular societies. In order to establish the social networks needed to acquire data for analysis in the actual places where toponyms exist and therefore derive their meaning, it is necessary to spend time with and understand the workings of the people who possess the toponymic knowledge. Ecolinguistics offers a clear set of assumptions for this purpose.

Despite this lack of an explicit outline of what an ecolinguistic fieldwork methodology may be in the ecolinguistic and linguistic ecology literature, several sketches and speculations about what such a methodological treatment may entail do exist. Earlier reviews of ecolinguistics (e.g., Fill, 2001 [1998]) see the role of ecolinguists and ecolinguistics interacting in the real world as a process of 'ecological correctness' vis-à-vis language, i.e., because languages (or ways of speaking) exist in the world, they can be accessed and documented. Applying this concept to a real-life example, I have previously explicated "how long term engagement with an isolated and specific speech community such as Norfolk Island can lead to positive results for the academy in terms of methodological refinement and development in ecolinguistics at the same time as being sensitive to the interests and priorities of the speakers of an endangered language" (Nash, 2011: 83). This position extends work into ecolinguistic methodology by Næssan (2009: 124–135), wherein a methodology of linguistic ecology was espoused and included within general structural analyses and field gathering techniques.

Some of the most recent work on ecolinguistic theory and methods relevant to an ecolinguistic take on toponymy is Ludwig et al.'s (2017) edited volume titled *Language Ecology and Language Contact*. Reflecting on traditional (linguistic) science approaches to methods, they write:

> an ecological perspective must constantly emphasize the inseparability of the organic whole and (quasi natural) continua and equilibriums; the principal scientific method, however, is analysis which in turn requires the dissection of that 'whole' into artificial parts and labels (see the discussion of Hutton's critique earlier). That is to say, whenever linguists conduct research on a specific linguistic variety, they must label and define their object of study as 'a language' or 'dialect' or 'variety' and dissect that object into

further parts. This procedure inevitably violates the holistic or ecological conception of language.

(p. 31)

Taking up the holism prescribed by Ludwig et al., and their consideration of linguistic ecology in other chapters in their edited work, doing ecolinguistic fieldwork on islands seems as fertile ground as any to experiment with and approach a holistic point of view of accessing language, place and people interaction.

An ecolinguistic fieldwork methodology holds that sustained contact, conducting research affably, good interpersonal dealings, the establishment of friendships and even the exchanging of gifts are what constitute a good fieldwork process. I have colloquially labeled this process *the vibe component of fieldwork*, i.e., through friendly and agreeable fieldwork dealings, one begins to vibe with the social, ecological, and linguistic situations one finds oneself in. This even involves making people aware of developments in the research and what part they have played, factors traditional linguistic fieldwork considers extraneous. Moreover, it claims that both fieldwork and fieldworker are interacting with and within the community and are not separate from the linguistic ecology. The aim is an understanding of the significance of the locally specific categories and processes as revealed through interaction.

My corpus of analyzable names published in Nash (2013: 133–295) draws on information in the possession of the local communities in the case study areas—the names, locations, and stories behind Norfolk Island and Dudley Peninsula toponyms. The Norfolk Island fishing ground names *Ah Yes!* and *No Trouble Reef* and the Dudley Peninsula names *No Reason* and *Between the Tits*, an offshore location which uses the undulating landscape mentioned in the terrestrial toponym *The Tits* in lining up the ground, express a colloquiality only possible to document in close personal connection and process-oriented fieldwork.

I used participant observation to put aspects of ecolinguistic theory into action. As a method for collecting data, ethnography focuses on speech acts and communication in action. Although this method can incorporate diachronic archival data dealing with sociological components of language in use and context, it is primarily concerned with collecting and analyzing synchronic speech in action. As a result, focusing on language in context and fixing certain predetermined parameters can be reductionistic. The ethnographic method can become both too vague and too specific. For example, it is often not clear where the context of language in use ends. This method also does not consider the many variables in linguistic, social and ecological interaction, which go beyond what is observable in speech acts in the communicative setting and language in context. Norfolk placenames like *Gudda Bridge* (literally Fuck Bridge) and *Parloo Park* (literally Masturbation Park) are hyper-specific and extremely pinpointed markers of local character and emplacement.

Ecolinguistics uses tools common to ethnographic data collection, but considers parameters not commonly present in ethnographic analysis. Given the primary emphasis with ecolinguistics is on interconnections and relationships and not categories or classification, the methods delineate fields and topics of inquiry that are suitable and practical. Ecolinguistics thus selects those relationships which illustrate key patterns for describing the linguistic ecology. For example, the ecolinguistic method considers that Norfolk Island fishing ground names such as *Bills*, *Acme* and *Dar Milky Tree* are related to more than just the people who fished in those areas or the boats or terrestrial features used to line up the fishing grounds. The social meaning of these toponyms, the processes of history associated with how toponyms come about and the inevitability of loss over time are all considered.

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Ecolinguistics asserts that because each ecology and each corpus of toponyms are different, similar and different processes and patterns of collecting data are required to record connections in their real-life context. This does not impose any predetermined rules or guidelines for what data should be collected or how they should be analyzed. The inductive nature of collecting and analyzing toponyms from an ecolinguistic perspective considers synchronic language in use, and structural analyses as well as archival sources, deeper ethnohistory, and the linguistic effect of the intricacies of the environment, e.g., isolation, language contact, interaction between different ways of thinking and acting. By combining synchronic, diachronic and environmental history considerations into a structural linguistic analysis, ecolinguistics is a powerful method for observing similarities and differences between the form and function of language in context. The Norfolk language placename *Baeccer Valley* (Tobacco Valley) on Phillip Island, 7 kilometers south of Norfolk Island, is both a synchronic environmental descriptor of landscape as well as a diachronic statement about land use change, i.e. tobacco was cultivated in this area.

Islands, toponymy and the proposed holistic ecolinguistic fieldwork methodology offer a novel way of thinking about and actually doing fieldwork. Although the parameter-rich (potentially) conclusion-poor position of ecolinguistics as a methodology may appear overly open ended to traditional structuralist approaches and methodologies in linguistics, by considering the relationship between universal and culturally specific phenomena, my appellation of an ecolinguistic fieldwork methodology and *the vibe component of fieldwork* as a method is able to integrate and consider not only phenomena between, within, and across contexts, but to enable an interpretation of what these contexts actually mean. Several of the toponymic examples I have given in this chapter are pertinent keyholes into accessing this multifactorial meaning. Traditional approaches to linguistic fieldwork that see language as a matrix of system-internal relationships cannot easily conceive of the study or field-based collection of language data beyond the scope of this system-internal matrix, i.e., sense-driven relationships within the system. This is where an ecolinguistic approach is warranted.

Future Directions

Because place-naming studies have not explicitly been a part of the ecolinguistic research agenda, I have based my survey on that which could be or has been applied to ecolinguistics through the conduit of toponymy as exploratory. The job of working within linguistics while wearing the hat of an ecolinguist is an eclectic one. As there is a significant dearth of overtly ecolinguistic writings in the field, I have been forced to dip into many different domains of research in order to synthesize and appreciate the complexity and power offered by the parameter rich-conclusion poor proposal of ecolinguistics. The field does not really offer much in and of itself for toponymy; still, it can house a diverse and open-minded toponymy within its core of some defined ecolinguistic structure.

I see the possibility of more aesthetic, artistic and place-naming focused sojourns into language and place under the banner of ecolinguistics. Creative writing, photography, drawing, cartography and other less scientifically focused fields of enquiry offer much to an ecolinguistic treatment of language, space-place and toponymy. The extensiveness of melding art and science, place and language and digital and analog can be enabled through the lens and membrane of toponymy and ecolinguistics. I believe it is in these more fringy regions, areas which have not normally been considered as a part of scientific study at all, where a ripe future for ecolinguistics and connected-to-languaged-place research lies. A toponymy

in concert with an ecolinguistics which straddles both the creative and the measured and the external (world, language) with the internal (self, human) offers itself to a much broader range of scholars than would typically be addressed. I would hope this melding of disciplines, attitudes and theoretical tools could provide the basis upon which more aesthetically focused and openly open crossovers of toponymy and ecolinguistics can proceed. This chapter and survey are offered as an invitation to such future work.

The broad conceptual net of ecolinguistics offers fertile ground future for work in toponymy and language and place-naming. The role of more aesthetically and artistically focused crossovers within toponymy, cartography, and the ideation of place are possible. No longer confined to what have been the rather stringent bounds of linguistics, history and geography, new movements in the environmental humanities, landscape art and aesthetic theory hint at more creative prospects for the interaction of toponymy within ecolinguistics and other related spheres of research.

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