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SHORT ARTICLE

## Language contact and ‘the Catch’: Norfolk Island fishing ground names

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### ABSTRACT

The author uses Norfolk fishing ground names on Norfolk Island (South Pacific) to illustrate how toponyms can be exposed to geographic, anthropological, and linguistic scrutiny. The grammar of the names demonstrates how Norfolk, the language of the Pitcairn descendants, typifies an esoteric insider language because of its ecologically connected toponyms and pragmatic determinants. Norfolk fishing ground names vary in their linguistic form and hence in their geography and spatiality. The toponymic and linguistic landscape of Norfolk Island reveals several processes that are significant for understanding sea-based geographies and the intertwining of creole languages, other contact languages, and the environment.



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### Introduction

The title of this article alludes to Shepard Forman’s article ‘Cognition and the Catch’ (Forman 1967). Forman’s work, which deals with anthropological processes involved in locating and naming fishing grounds, is among the very limited research relevant to the geography and linguistics of fishing ground toponymy that has been published to date. Considering the recent interest in Norwegian fishing ground naming, mobility, and fisheries (Brattland & Nilsen 2011; Brattland 2013; Gerrard 2013), it seems reasonable to offer a linguistically directed analysis of a South Pacific example of fishing ground naming that should be of interest to geographers, anthropologists, and linguists. My case study is based on Norfolk Island, an external territory of Australia, c.1700 km east of the Australian mainland (Fig. 1). It is an archipelago consisting of three islands: Norfolk, Nepean, and Phillip. I am principally concerned with the history and linguistics of fishing grounds names in Norfolk, the contact language spoken by the descendants of HMS *Bounty* mutineers who were moved from Pitcairn Island to Norfolk Island in the mid-19th century. My perspective is based on my earlier studies (e.g. Nash 2013; 2014a) and

builds on these by dealing specifically with how a linguistic analysis of fishing grounds in the language contact environment can contribute to better understanding of the relation between cultural geography and fishing ground toponymy.

This short article does not allow for the provision of details about the ontology and history of Norfolk.<sup>1</sup> The language spoken on Norfolk Island stems from a way of speaking that emerged from 1790 onwards on Pitcairn Island, in a small community comprising Tahitian and English speakers as well as one person from St. Kitts in the Caribbean. In 1856, all Pitcairn islanders were moved to Norfolk Island, and their arrival marked the beginning of Norfolk as a form of the language formerly spoken on Pitcairn and that underwent changes following its transplantation to a new environment. My argument is that an understanding of Norfolk toponymy as well as Norfolk fishing ground names and processes of naming these grounds is significant for comprehending how the bilingual linguistic ecology of Norfolk Island (Norfolk and English) and both land and sea use have been mediated by each other. As such, my geographical analysis of Norfolk fishing ground names, which are contact language toponyms, should

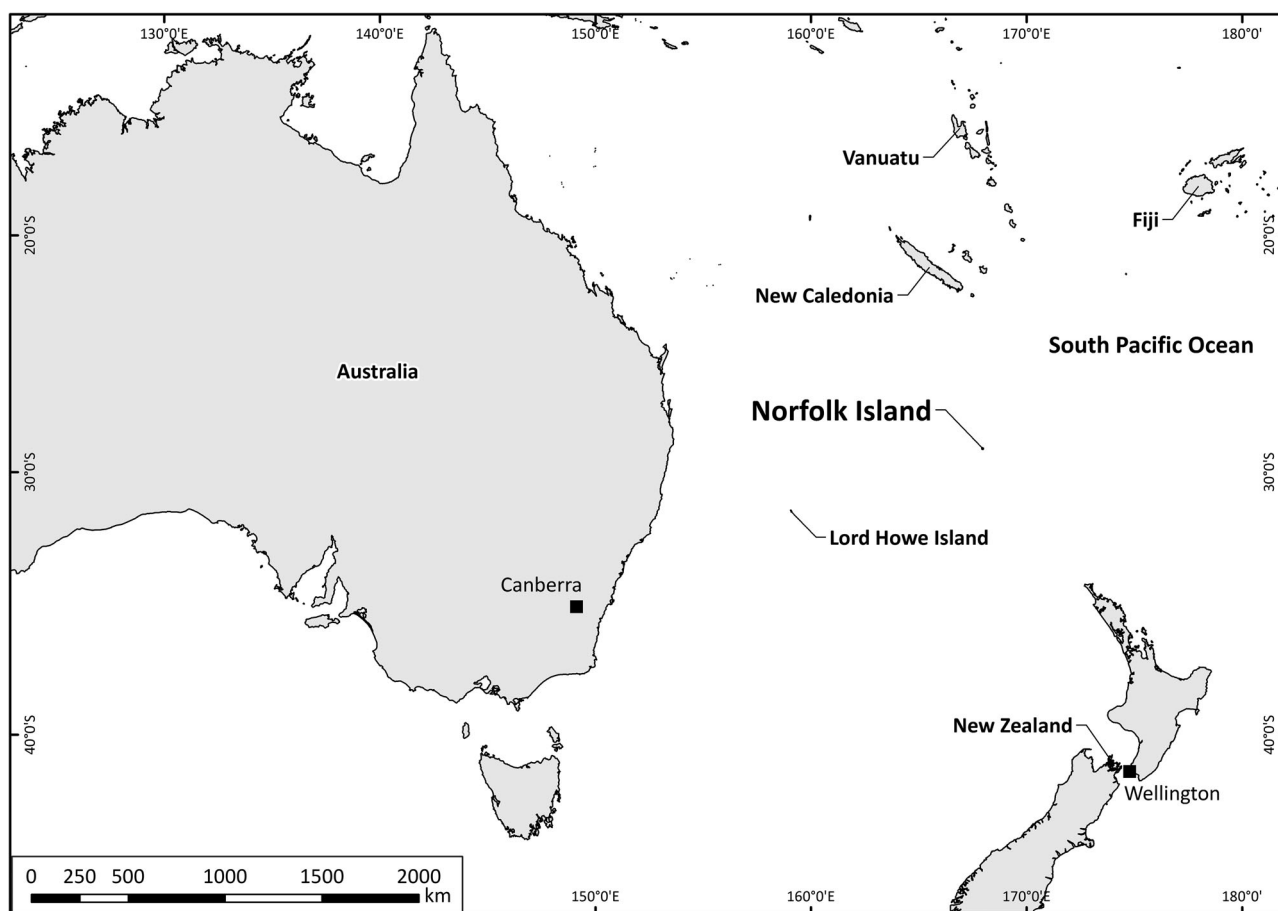


Fig. 1. Location of Norfolk Island

be of interest to geographers as well as to creolists and language contact scholars (for an explication of Norfolk place names and creole toponymy, see Nash 2014b).

### Context and method

Although Forman (1967) considered the ethnographic importance of the names when documenting fishermen in the municipality of Coqueiral in Brazil, I have not come across any analyses in which the linguistic uniqueness and importance of fishing ground names have been emphasized. A further apparent deficiency in the literature is that fishing ground names, their status in the language contact environment, and their potential contribution to typological investigations into languages have not been stressed. In this article I apply conceptual aspects involved in documenting fishing ground names to linguistic aspects of the form and content of the names. I collected these toponyms during three two-week field trips to Norfolk Island in 2008 and 2009.

Norfolk Island fishing ground names were recorded during interviews with five Norfolk Island fishermen, when the locations of the fishing grounds were plotted

on an offshore map of Norfolk Island and the history of the names were documented. Obtaining data relating to fishing ground names was initially a sensitive issue because their location had traditionally been almost coveted insider knowledge that would not normally be shared with other members of the community. After I had established a rapport with the group of fishermen with whom I worked intently both onshore and offshore, I was able to ask questions freely about their fishing grounds. Frequent questions that I asked were: What is the name of the fishing ground? Who named it and when was it named? Where is it and how do you locate it? What kinds of fish would you catch there? In total, 65 fishing ground names were elicited, of which 14 contain Norfolk lexemes: these were either grammatical lexemes (i.e. articles and prepositions) or content words (i.e. Norfolk substantives or proper nouns). I obtained information on the locations linked to 43 of the 65 names (Fig. 2). Since the cultural and ecological links to language and place apparent from the linguistics and geography of the Norfolk names are integral to my argument, Fig. 2 shows only the approximate locations of fishing ground locations, not the exact locations.

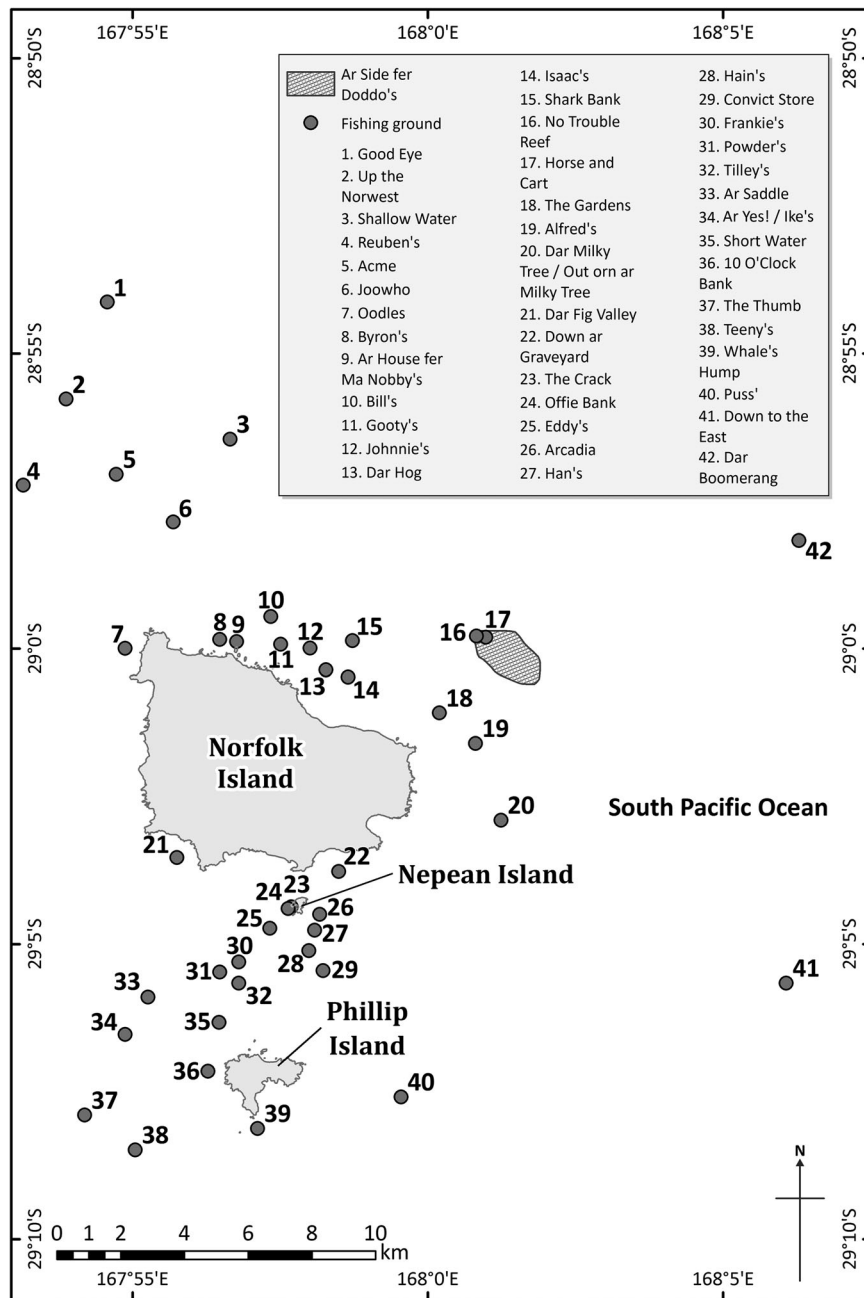


Fig. 2. Location of Norfolk Island fishing grounds, with English or Norfolk names

### Fishing ground names

Fishing ground names are an aspect of toponymy that has been scantily documented in the literature. Apart from David Capel's (1977) description of colloquial names for fishing grounds in coastal South Australia, the most comprehensive descriptions of fishing ground names have been published by Per Hovda (1961) for the western coast of Norway and Shepard Forman (1967) for mangrove-based fishing in coastal areas of Brazil. Simone Blair's (2006) account of a neighbourhood-based narrative of fishing *shots* (fishing grounds) in

the Gippsland Lakes in Victoria, Australia, and Dennis Gaffin's (1996) analysis of fishing grounds in the Faeroe Islands (Denmark) report the significance of including fishing ground names as part of recorded oral culture and memory, which to date have rarely been documented by ethnographers. Blair lists fishing shot names including Gilly's Snag, Silver Shot Slunk, and Coaler's Rack, and Gaffin mentions, for example, Shag Bank and Aksal's Spot. The research conducted by both Hovda and Forman focused on locating fishing grounds and some measure of their cultural import, and the

research done by both Blair and Gaffin emphasized the weight of these names as cultural descriptors. However, I have not come across an account in the literature that combines the linguistic and cultural significance of fishing ground names.

Many of the fishing grounds off Norfolk Island are located in shallow reefs and crevices, and have been found through experimentation and trial and error over time. The elderly interviewees knew that the fishing ground names existed and were used in the past. However, most of the interviewed islanders did not know the names or the history of the names (e.g. who named them first, who continued to use them, why they were named, and where the fishing grounds were located). There may have been several reasons for their lack of knowledge, such as lack of usage, loss of memory, and secrecy:

A fisherman rarely teaches the art of lining up a specific fishing spot, and a boy's apprenticeship consists largely of curiosity and persistence. While a fisherman is always delighted to have a young apprentice help to augment his catch, he avoids taking him to a preferred spot. (Forman 1967, 422)

My field research on Norfolk Island with fishermen who still remembered and used fishing landmarks and a visual triangulation system of landmarks to locate their grounds revealed that knowledge of these landmarks for fishing purposes was exclusively the held by the older members of the community, who were predominantly men. The knowledge was not gender-specific in itself, but rather because few women fished offshore around Norfolk Island and women on the island generally had less access to fishing ground knowledge. Any such knowledge, if known to women at all, typically consisted of a few common names that had been overheard when spoken by male relatives.

Fishing off the coast of Norfolk Island has taken place for more than a century. No extant fishing ground knowledge existed before 1856, prior to the arrival of the Pitcairners. While fishing grounds may have been located and used prior to 1856, the interviewees were not aware of any such names or locations. However, it is likely any offshore fishers would have used similar grounds and similar triangulation techniques to those used by the Pitcairners. My e-mail correspondence with a Pitcairn islander suggested that a similar system of triangulation exists on Pitcairn:

We have many names offshore, e.g. 'Har road fer Cookies', 'Har Rooster', 'Out har Bear', 'Har Speckle Side', 'Headache', 'Matt en Dowley'. The [land]marks are taken from ridges or trees lined up with the coastline

or Island. These have been passed down through the generations. (Meralda Warren, personal communication, 24 March 2008)

Initially, rowing boats would have been used for fishing and later replaced with boats equipped with single piston motors that enabled fishermen to fish farther away from the island. At some point in time these were superseded by boats that could travel up to 30 km from Norfolk Island for commercial fishing, but fishermen still relied on distinct landmarks on Norfolk Island to gain their offshore bearings. When trees are chopped down and other landmarks, such as houses and electricity poles, are removed, fishing landmarks are lost. As a result, elements of Norfolk, including place names and specifically fishing ground names, are very closely linked to Norfolk Island's linguistic landscape. This *creole spatiality*—the spatial idea and reality that social and linguistic space is formed around linguistic artefacts in determined yet fluid locations in the language contact environment—drives how descriptors such as Norfolk fishing ground names come into being, are managed, and are representative of a broader cultural 'imaginary' (Appadurai 1986).<sup>2</sup>

## Discussion

The 14 Norfolk fishing ground names containing Norfolk lexemes and their English translations are listed in Table 1. There are a number of linguistic patterns in the fishing ground data:

1. Fishing ground names that have been named after people tend to take the form of a proper noun + possessive (e.g. 'Yeaman's'). Other syntactic variants occur in connection with the obligatory semantic component (e.g. 'Yeaman's' can occur as Dar Side fer Yeaman's or as Dar fer Yeaman's).

**Table 1.** Norfolk Island fishing ground names (14) containing Norfolk lexemes and their English translations

Norfolk fishing ground name	English translation
Ar Benk fer Pili Hani's	Pili Hani's Bank
Ar Gun Pit	The Gun Pit
Ar House fer Ma Nobby's	Ma Nobby's House
Ar Pine fer Robinson's	Robinson's Pine
Ar Side fer Doddo's	Doddo's Place
Ar Yes!	Ah Yes!
Dar fer Yeaman's	Yeaman's Place
Dar Hog	The Hog
Down ar Graveyard	Down the Graveyard
Down ar East	Down to the East
Offie Bank	Trevally Bank
Out orn ar Milky Tree	Out on the Milky Tree
Up ar Norwest	Up the Northwest
Up ar Sand	Up on the Sand

2. ((Norf'k) definite article) + noun (+ noun) is productive, for example Ar Saddle, Dar Fig Valley, Dar Boomerang, Offie Bank (*offie* is a Norf'k word for trevally fish). These are all descriptive names that describe terrestrial features used by fishermen when they are lining up landmarks. For example, the name Dar Hog means 'Looking back to Norfolk Island on this mark, there is a topographical feature in the cliff that looks like a big black hog lying down'. The elements 'ar' and 'dar' are used in free variation in all of these forms, and their usage is determined by certain pragmatic constraints: when Norf'k is spoken, Norf'k articles are used.
3. Norf'k fishing ground names can take spatial prepositions (e.g. Out orn ar Milky Tree and Down ar Graveyard). One English name, The Crack, can be rendered into the Norf'k 'Ar Crack' and therefore discussed according to the absolute spatial preposition system developed on Norfolk Island and in Norf'k—hence, Out Ar Crack.
4. Some Norf'k fishing ground names have arisen through humour. For example, Ar Yes! derived its name from the fact that when the fish start biting someone once exclaimed 'Ar yes! They're down there').

The variation in the incidence of the definite article forms 'ar' and 'dar' is pragmatically driven. In cases when a name is either specified or emphasized, particularly in spoken Norf'k, the 'dar' form of the article is used (e.g. Dar Hog instead of Ar Hog). Although The Crack, The Saddle, and Whale's Hump appear as English forms, on the basis of pragmatic constraints such names adhere to the following rule: ((Norf'k) definite article) + noun (+ noun) (e.g. Ar Whale's Hump, Ar Milky Tree). When fishing ground names take Norf'k lexemes, most commonly articles, they are pronounced using Norf'k pronunciation—Norf'k is spoken and Norf'k articles are used. The pronunciation of fishing ground names can determine whether a name is English or Norf'k. The names *Acme* and *Arcadia* and Reuben's, Joo-who, and No Trouble (Reef) are commonly pronounced with Norf'k pronunciation when used and spoken by Norf'k speakers.

The fishing ground names Ar Crack, Ar Gardens, Ar Thumb, Ar Saddle, Dar Milky Tree, Dar Fig Valley, Dar Boomerang, Convict Store, and Offie Bank are all descriptive. They describe the nature of the terrestrial topography used when fishermen line up the marks, the fish caught in the area, the type of vegetation near the mark, or the nature of the underwater environment surrounding the ground.

Many fishing grounds have multiple names. For example, Eddy's is also known as Dar (Side) fer Yeaman's, which was named after Eddy Yeaman. Other examples (with their English translations in parentheses) are:

- Alfred's / Dar Side fer Alfred's / Dar fer Alfred's (Alfred's Place)
- Ma Nobby's / Dar House fer Ma Nobby's / Ar House fer Ma Nobby's / Dar fer Ma Nobby's / Dar fer Nobby's (Ma Nobby's House)
- Graveyard / Dar Graveyard/Down ar Graveyard (Down the Graveyard)
- Milky Tree / Out orn ar Milky Tree (Out on the Milky Tree)
- Whale's Hump / Dar Whale's Hump (Whale's Hump)
- Up the Norwest / Out the Norwest / Up ar Norwest / Out ar Norwest (Up/Out the Northwest)
- Ar Yes! / Iye's / Ike's / Ikey's / Side fer Iye's (Ike's Place)
- Doddo's / Ar Side fer Doddo's (Doddo's Place)
- Gun Pit / Ar Gun Pit / Out ar Gun Pit (The Gun Pit)
- Ar Saddle / Out ar Saddle (The Saddle)

It is not clear how to make a distinction between the linguistic statuses of fishing grounds. Because these names have originated over time and have developed unofficially, they have a high level of grammatical variability and embedded cultural understanding. Other fishing grounds were named by Norfolk islanders after Norfolk islanders, such as Gooty's, Alfred's, Tilley's, Frankie's, and Bellie's (not listed in [Table 1](#)). While the formal structure of these names is similar to English forms, their semantic component, such as Yeaman's or Dar fer Yeaman's (Yeaman's Place), is an insider cultural concept linked to fishing places and the people who fished there. I claim that because Yeaman was a Norfolk islander who spoke Norf'k, an apparently English name such as Yeaman's is actually a Norf'k name.

Similarly, the English topographical name Gun Pit may be prefixed with the Norf'k article 'ar' to form the fishing ground name Ar Gun Pit. This is most likely to have occurred when Norfolk islander fishermen spoke Norf'k. However, from this analysis it is not clear what criteria should be used to decide whether a name is Norf'k or English. I consider Norf'k fishing ground names to be names that contain Norf'k lexemes. Even though Bellie's (without the implied Norf'k 'Dar fer' component) contains only English elements—Bellie + 's—there are implied cultural relations, as Bellie McCoy was a Norfolk islander and a Norf'k speaker, which raises questions as to whether this name could

be English. Because of this lack of clarity in defining what Norf'k is and considering it in relation to English, it is difficult to use fishing ground names containing Norf'k lexemes to argue that Norf'k is a separate way of speaking as distinct from English.

### Concluding remarks

While this article poses an argument for the efficacy of fishing ground names as linguistic and geographical entities within a specific cultural location, it is driven by a more developed theoretical perspective on the embedded nature of language in specific contexts and spaces. I have hinted at the concept of creole spatiality and the existence of language as toponyms in space and geography as appropriate for characterizing the functionality of fishing ground names in addition to describing the grammatical form of these linguistic entities. The spatiality of these names and their role as cultural and cartographic elements within Norfolk Island toponymy and the grammar and pragmatics of the Norf'k language is a significant point for geographers and for descriptions of a toponymy and geography of obscure sea-based locations.

The spatiality of any language, the spatiality specifically of language contact and creoles, and the mobility of language and the mobility of names in space all exemplify how people who know and use language move through spaces when they talk and think and interact with names. The insider nature of such linguistic transience as seen in naming, the embeddedness of distinct ways of talking about place, and the mixed and creolized nature of contact languages such as Norf'k all suggest a strong amalgam involving language contact and cultural connection. An analysis of fishing ground names offers an uncommon lens through which to observe these phenomena. I hope this Pacific example offers some useful insights for scholars conducting similar research in other parts of the world.

### Notes

1. The interested reader is referred to any of the numerous other descriptions of the events surrounding the development of the language and its usage on Norfolk Island today. Shirley Harrison (1985) provides a good introduction to the social setting of Norfolk Island speech. In addition, I have dealt with similar issues involved in the social and ecological role of the Norf'k language and culture (Nash 2013).
2. The linguistic status of Norf'k remains a matter of debate, but it is a contact language that has received attention from

language contact scholars and creolists. Since linguistically the language is neither pidgin nor creole, it may seem a misnomer to apply the expression creole spatiality when describing fishing ground names in Norf'k. I use the terms 'creole' and 'creole spatiality' in a more general sense and as a matter of convenience. My intention is that the expression can subsequently be applied to other contact languages more generally (i.e. languages that may not necessarily be classified as creole).

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