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COMMENT

Toponymy, drawing, and representing place: a comment on James Cantrill's "On Seeing 'Places'"

Joshua Nash

Linguistics, School of Behavioural, Cognitive and Social Sciences, University of New England, Armidale, NSW, Australia

ABSTRACT

Cantrill's [(2015). On seeing "places" for what they are, and not what we want them to be. *Environmental Communication*. doi:10.1080/17524032.2015.1048268] commentary on representing place, actors and informants summarises a large body of place research relevant to environmental communication. This comment offers an addendum to Cantrill's description of representational validity - the degree to which investigative conclusions accord with the perceptions held by the respondents who originally generate data on which the analyses are based. It reconsiders the tools available to scholars researching place to assess how several of Cantrill's methodological and theoretical suggestions may have already been realised in various linguistic and ethnographic approaches developed in the field of linguistic ecology.

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I read with interest James Cantrill's commentary "On Seeing 'Places' for What They *Are*, and Not What We *Want* Them to Be" in this journal. It is heartening to learn reflective discussions about the psychological and communicative implications of place are not passé and endure in social science research. The piece identifies several well-practised and well-entrenched methods common in communications research, ethnography, cultural geography, and possibly in the environmental humanities. Cantrill claims these techniques are to a greater or lesser extent in need of refinement based in a(ny) more self-sceptical and representationally valid study of place. Of the several points Cantrill presents regarding how people communicate personal ideas and knowledge as data in place research, I wish to offer an addendum to Cantrill's description of *representational validity*, to reconsider the tools available to scholars researching place, and to assess how several of Cantrill's methodological and theoretical suggestions may have already been realised in various linguistic and ethnographic outlets. Unfortunately, Cantrill did not specify who his audience was. Most likely it included social scientists, communication scholars, environmental analysts, and planners, since place issues arise quite often in the analyses carried out by all of these scholars.

Here I draw attention to the potential effectiveness of linguistic ecology, also known as ecolinguistics, in advocating for a valid and dynamic representational validity in place-based field research. I do not offer this as a challenge to Cantrill's work, because he does not pose linguistic ecology or any other method as *par excellence* in place study. Rather, my intervention is a proposal for reflection on crossovers involving environmental communication, place research, and thinking into language and environment. My argument is honed towards what methodological and theoretical work

linguistic ecology can do in such situations. It is meant for those scholars working in the field of, or whom may be inspired by, the benefits of linguistic ecology.

I have been involved in research into linguistic ecology for more than 15 years. The field has two major research strands, namely research into the language of environment(alism) and the environmental movement, work which *Environmental Communication* has featured, and research into the environment of language, or linguistic ecology, the study of languages in interaction with(in) social and natural ecologies. While I have written about the former, my position in this commentary is concerned with the latter: linguistic ecology and how the understanding of how languages exist and are embodied in place can contribute to studies in environmental communication. More specifically I am a toponymist—a place-naming researcher—and my work for the past near-decade has been concerned with analysing how people name places, talk about the world through toponyms, and interact with place-space through language on island environments in Australia and Oceania.

Toponymy is integral to place research. Toponyms and toponymies are implicit and explicit proxies and membranes for accessing detailed historical relations implicating place, people, power, and language. Other communication scholars have dealt with toponyms, for example, Carbaugh (1999) and Samuels (2001), and the relationships mediated by toponyms in the language and communication fieldwork situation. Here I use an amalgam of linguistic ecology, toponymy, and the method of drawing-as-place-representation as a means to extend Cantrill's discussions of place meaning.

My fieldwork depends heavily on primary research, mainly through face-to-face interviews with people who possess placename knowledge. Like other linguists and ethnographers, I have returned continually to my field sites and conducted reliability tests with many informants, some of whom became my friends, about the locations, histories, and meanings of the toponyms I collected. This work has been published in scientific and several non-academic and popular outlets. All were produced with the direct involvement of the communities within which I was working. Without their input, no content; without content, no maps; without maps, no publication; without publication, much of their knowledge would have been lost.

Where Cantrill uses *resonate* to describe how “to show how any set of research findings actually resonates with those who utter primary depictions or respond to stimuli in generating the original data,” I have used the expression *The Vibe Component*. This complex yet applicable concept urges the fieldworker to relate in a socially intimate and aware manner. The fieldworker must *vibe* with people, situations, and places in order to obtain good data in congenial research settings. Apropos of placenames, it is essential to observe how names function in the minds of the members of these specific communities and how they perceive place in terms of these names. The Vibe Component is a process which enables the personalisation of toponymic data and which informs how the place scientist humanises their own work and their subjective representation of other people's data:

Toponyms are not arbitrary ephemera that exist in a vacuum; they are culturally embedded and alive, living, existing, making sense only in the minds and the environments of the people who know their meanings. (Nash, 2016, p. 4)

There is nothing unique about such an individual methodological approach to language documentation, toponymic fieldwork, and linguistic ethnography-cum-anthropological linguistics. What has been referred to as salvage linguistics (e.g. Breen 1980; Evans, 2001) has its role to play in linguistic research, toponymy, and here, in environmental communication and place research. One of Cantrill's (2015, p. 7) main contentions is that:

Given the psychological and social complexity of place perceptions, and the fact that observers are likely to differ from their informants in terms of experiential backgrounds, one might expect communication researchers would at least question the assumed correspondence between person-place relations as interpreted via the data they collect and what the progenitors of that data think or feel. And, perhaps, many ethnographers do as a matter of habit.

Here I would add “some linguists.” I claim my toponymic research on Norfolk Island (South Pacific) and Dudley Peninsula (Kangaroo Island, South Australia) has done exactly what Cantrill claims would be ideal. I walked across properties with informants, an aloof descriptor to denote those with whom I interacted, drank cups of tea, and learned about their lives and problems, travelled in boats out to fishing grounds, and drove down dusty roads on a local postman’s mail run where he pointed out places and told me stories. As regards toponymy and place research, my take is certainly not the first to have suggested such a stance. In her work on Barbudan placenames in the Caribbean, Berleant-Schiller (1991, pp. 92–93) writes:

Long-term field research in toponymy is by nature slow, but it is far from unrewarding. It allows the researcher not only to gather primary data, in this case place names, but to observe the culture in which they are embedded and their relationship to changes in land use and landscape. The researcher can experience the place and its people, incorporate local language and speech into the study, and elicit the contributions of native speakers. Far from being misinformed, local residents are the only sources of local speech, oral tradition, and place names that are not on maps or that differ from those maps. They are also the only providers of information that leads to an understanding of indigenous systems of knowledge and ways of ordering and classifying the world.

While we may not be able to go back in time to, say, walk with and ask Thoreau what he meant by the words he used to describe the countryside (Cantrill, 2015, p. 8), we can definitely walk with those who are living, those Berleant-Schiller tells us are “far from misinformed,” and work with them in a manner which is not only beneficial to empirical studies of the science of place, but can actually document endangered place-based, linguistic, and cultural knowledge, which, often, if not for our presence, would have been lost when persons with large amounts of place-knowledge die.

Most writers are in a privileged position when writing about place. We have a responsibility to the academy, to those we interview, and ultimately ourselves as scientists to present accurate details and not misrepresent those who are not availed the same opportunity as we have to document and theorise about their place-based knowledge. For this, reliability checks are essential and indispensable when we aspire to produce true and truthful renditions of data given to us by those with whom we interact in the field.

I have checked the reliability of toponymic data with many Norfolk Islanders and Dudley Peninsula residents. Where many joked and posed that I would most likely have been tricked or given false information from outsider wary islanders, I was able to produce comprehensive maps of the data I collected. My presence was particularly sensitive because the place documentation research involved the sensitive topic of recording the locations and histories of a quite guarded toponymic taxon, to wit, fishing ground names. Through reliability tests across interviews with several different and knowledgeable informants of different ages, I was able to crosscheck and ascertain that the information I had received was in fact correct and accurate, I returned to my field sites several times. Those people I interviewed believe I had not only produced an accurate cartographical representation of these two fishing ground histories, but that I had saved a large amount of cultural knowledge from being lost. This was primarily because the two most knowledgeable men whom I interviewed died when I was conducting my research. They claimed they had given me all the toponymic knowledge they knew. All these techniques and processes are applicable to a methodology falling under the banner of linguistic ecology.

Cantrill lists three ways in which the issue of representational validity might be addressed in place-based research: (1) to acknowledge potential differences in meaning and attempt to mitigate challenges to validity by way of explicit reasoning or archival evidence; (2) to return to a sample of respondents, share with them the fruits of the empirical exercise, and ask if inductively generated themes or quantitative conclusions regarding the focused upon place make sense to both the researchers and the researched; and (3) to unpack the relationship between place and local culture in a combination of observer and informant viewpoints regarding a wide range of subjects. According to Cantrill (2015, pp. 9–10), this final, more engaging dialogic empiricism maximises:

the likelihood of aligning observer and informant perspectives while, at the same time, providing local communities of practice the opportunity to gain insight into places they inhabit, as well as feel more confident that the research conclusions take into account their lived experience (Haywood, 2014). In addition, if scholars begin the process by enfranchising culturally immersed informants in the design of place-based studies, researchers are better able to identify locally relevant terms that can be used in both the recruitment of participants and the wording of subsequent interview prompts.

It is not my position to claim that I *enfranchised* those people with whom I worked, but I most definitely did my best to listen to them and represent them in the best way I could. It is here I would like to turn to an example from one of my field sites. I pose this instance as a test of not only representational validity and reliability in the data that I obtained but how the actual fieldwork interaction is essential when conducting place research.

In a recent paper (Nash, 2015), I presented a drawing of an offshore fishing ground name on Norfolk Island drawn by my knowledgeable informant. This representation persists as this man's own place-knowledge within the field of science. I believe an artistic and creative depiction here renders the artistic scientific. A wholly personal, unfettered, and largely spontaneous *drawing event* has now become precipitated as toponymic and place-knowledge and a somewhat anarchic push of a “far from misinformed” person into the realm of realised place research and an individual embodiment of language in the world. In such a situation, what is art and what is science is obscured, the roles of observer and observed seemed to have flip-flopped, and the by-then dead had been given a voice: his remembrance and telling of the location and story of Norfolk fishing ground Shallow Water. That is, my informant had passed, but his knowledge and legacy continued through the scientific incarnation of this toponymic drawn event (Figure 1).

Although I take a more aesthetic process in my depiction implicating the crossover between the documenter and the documented in linguistic work and my position on environmental communication, Reaser and Myrick (2015) have broached this topic more scientifically when summarising the impact of writing language-based trade books and making linguistics accessible to lay audiences. And it is a similar perspective—making place-based knowledge and research not only more compelling to

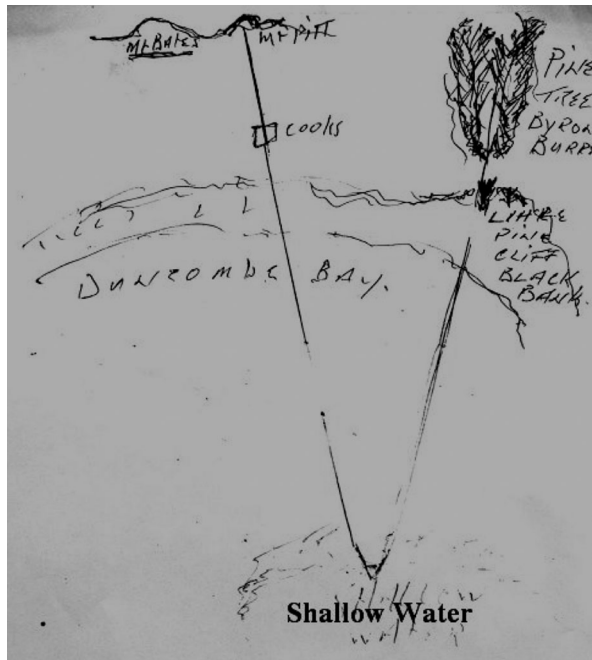


Figure 1. Hand-drawn depiction of Shallow Water (Norfolk Island, 2008).

both academics and laypersons but based in looking more at what places *are* and not what we *want* them to be—which lies at the heart of Cantrill’s position.

As a testament to the memories of the people I interviewed in the field, I used their real names in my work and never used pseudonyms. The people I worked with were happy for me to do so, and many have since thanked me for using their and other people’s real names. They were knowledgeable people who lived and worked on the land and locations where I interviewed them. They were not anonymous. By writing them into the scientific work I created, their place-knowledge will be remembered and honoured and they will not be forgotten.

In assessing Cantrill’s piece, I myself took his advice and reassessed my self-scepticism toward my own work. While I am in a privileged position now as a postdoctoral researcher working on the language and toponymy of Pitcairn Island as an extension of my Norfolk writings, I am only as good as my informants allow. Such a position is reminiscent of Cantrill and Masluk’s (1996) observations relating the privileged position of the writer to how place, landscape, and the environment are described in discourse. I am responsible for turning the analogue with which they house me—the drawn, the pictorially represented, mind maps—into the digital—text, articles, images, maps, the cartographic. In such representation and transference, there must be an implied self-scepticism from both sides, reliability tests required from actors and informants. I believe it may be in the point of establishing equilibrium between agency in science and autonomy in the aesthetic that a reconciliation of Cantrill’s contention with place research may lie.

I have argued elsewhere that a more detailed toponymy-as-place research could possibly imply a melding and crossover of art and-to science. This position may help scholars and laypersons arrive at more rigorous yet simultaneously flexible place research which may in fact be richer in the number of considered parameters and the ability for the field of environmental communication to develop through this evolution. The contradictions between actor and actant might conceivably not be as vast as some research hitherto has posed.

That the map is not the territory need not be overemphasised here. There will always be methodological issues in place research and in science generally. As a writer one is almost-always and naturally in a position of privilege, whatever that may mean for place-based research. Those who provide information to place researchers are also in a position of power; they hold much in terms of what they impart and what they do not. Still, literal and more abstract statements can be reliable in both directions, with, as I have experienced, both researcher and community being satisfied. When we bring the field of toponymy into the domains of place research and environmental communication, we observe that many anthropologists, toponymists, and linguists strive to implicate and involve the “other” in their descriptions. Anthropologists Basso’s (1988, 1996) work with the Western Apache and Gaffin’s (1996) documentation of Faeroe Islander people’s connection to place, historian and artist Carter’s (1986) creative interpretation of spatial history and place-naming in colonial Australia, geographer Kari’s (2011) study of Ahtna Athabascan geographic knowledge in Alaska, and Myers’s (1986, p. 57) “life-world of constituted meanings” of the Pintupi people in Aboriginal Australia all draw on synthesised fieldworker–informant exchanges of benefit to place research and environmental communication.

These works see interaction as a means and medium that allows communication about both environmental (world) concerns and abstract place artefacts. Methods and theory in representational validity, linguistic ecology, and researcher–respondent privilege exist as suitable bedfellows. Where maps, drawings, and knowledges exist as embodiments of communication about place, they document what can be accessed through fieldwork and represented in literal acts like drawing and other less concrete practices of communicating. I believe it is in the sensuous, emotional, and aesthetic nature of assessing boundaries between observer–privilege and informant–privilege that we may arrive at a more evolved appraisal of representing and writing (about) place.

Disclosure statement

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