

WHEN DO LINGUISTS MAKE THEIR BEST (CARTOGRAPHIC) WORK?

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Abstract: The title of this research note alludes to P.H. Franses' papers in *Creativity Research Journal* 'When Do Painters Make Their Best Work?' (2013) and 'When Did Nobel Prize Laureates in Literature Make Their Best Work?' (2014). The speculative polemic is based on several years of linguistic engagement involving fieldwork in remote island communities in Oceania. I contend that doing linguistics, specifically collecting toponymic (placename) data, is an aesthetic, artistic, and creative commitment as well as a scientific endeavour involving accessing the language awareness of a group of individuals. The creative manifestation of linguistic and toponymic research is twofold: the explicit cartographic representation, where I pose the map as art, and the more subtle interaction and development of friendships within specific communities associated with the research. Both appearances are creatively driven and are a part of accessing how we possess and become aware of language and how such language is expressed in maps.

THE ART OF FIELDWORK

H.F. Wolcott's (2005) *The Art of Fieldwork* proffers a treatise to fieldworkers from all fields to synthesise the artistic and the scientific. I read Wolcott's work during the final throes of my doctoral research in 2011, when I was reconsidering the role of friendship, personalisation of experiences, and interpersonal interaction in the data I was analysing. I hoped to find solace in Wolcott's words, something relevant to what I had experienced during linguistic fieldwork in my two island field sites: Norfolk Island, South Pacific and the Dudley Peninsula on Kangaroo Island, South Australia. The more I looked at my data, the more the maps appeared in my email inbox from my cartographer, and the more the ideation of the interaction involving language, people, and place started to evolve, the more it became clear I was engaged in both a scientific as well as a creative-aesthetic-awareness generating pursuit. I could not take the 'I' out of anything I had experienced and anything I was writing. The creative process of writing linguistics, and the linguistics of writing and mapping, started to develop into a dialectical pilgrimage; I had engaged with people through language (English and Norfolk, the Norfolk Island language), had discussed their languages (Norfolk, Norfolk English, and (South) Australian English), and I was now travelling through and analysing their language in the form of the placenames (toponyms) I had documented. I had engaged in active language awareness creation.

During the laborious yet expressive process of working within the post-fieldwork situation, I realised that there comes a time in creative practice when we begin making friends with our data, project, and work. Without intending to sound religious and esoteric, one's work begins to become and resemble worship. And through our engagement in the creative process via scientific and aesthetic means, this act of homage is reciprocated; our project and process starts working for and with(in) us. We create our project and our work is created through us. In this short piece I describe elements of these relationships using the notion of creativity and language awareness as a driver within the aesthetics and art of (language documentation) fieldwork. I explicate my thesis using pilgrimage as a tool interpreting active engagement in the field, and seek to arrive at a speculative answer to the question posed in my title: when do linguists do their best (cartographic) work?

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THE ARTIST AND THE PLACENAME

Most of my linguistic field research has focused on documenting toponyms and language–place relationships. Historically, toponymy has been of peripheral interest to linguists. It has often fallen into the ‘too hard’ category. Geographers, historians, cartographers, and anthropologists offer and employ different methods through which toponyms can be used within their discipline-specific analyses. Let me move away from these conceptions into what I believe to be a more creatively driven abstraction of what the placename-as-a-linguistic-entity is, and what creativity and language awareness research may offer concerning the conception of the linguistics of toponyms as artistic and aesthetic artefacts. The action of fieldwork and the process of collecting these linguistic and mappable antiques pilot my conjecture.

When the toponymic researcher reads a map he has never seen before or hears a placename he is yet to document, several questions may arise: Who named these places? Why were they so named? What took place here? Are there any other names that do not appear on these maps? Maps are awareness creators and can be used to create further awareness of place-language interactions. As a toponymist-linguist and an artist-scientist, I have collected other people’s names and I have created my own maps from these specific locations, histories, and monikers. These processes appear different; chronicling name accounts and instituting global history through mapping these toponyms. The former leads to what I have dubbed ‘friendship, fieldwork, and self’ while the latter results in projected cartography represented in the world. Both are creating history – history in the mind and history in the projected, two-dimensional language in and of place. The relationship between language, environment, people, and place has far reaching ramifications for how linguists and knowers of language, respectively, become aware of the knowledge they are collecting and the knowledge they possess.

I treat the map as a piece of art; not only art but also cultural history that has an artistic element and bent. It is a record, a means of accessing the layerings of accumulated pasts and awarenesses. Within these cartographic events lies insight into the psychology of the namer and the means by which the fieldworker accesses this psychology. Names and maps can be funny, imaginative, experimental, creative (e.g. Pitcairn Island’s Pitcairn language name *Side Dan Kaek orn Big Jack* – The Place Where Dan Did a Shit on Big Jack). They can also be entirely uninteresting, verging on boring (e.g. Red Stone, Bird Rock, John’s Place). The toponymic fieldworker’s job is not to judge but to take these names, create a context, map them cartographically and linguistically, and attribute meaning to them. This is as much a technical task as it is a creative enterprise. The crossover between the interesting and the boring in toponymy, in collecting and writing about placenames, has definitely led to some of my best work already. This, my first individually published book (Nash 2013), appeared when I was 37 years and 10 months old.

THE FISHERMAN IS (ALSO) AN ARTIST

One of the placename taxa I have documented during my toponymic adventuring is fishing ground names. The fishing ground name is the bastion of a great amount of aesthetic weight and obvious situated awareness of language. Not normally privy to the scrutiny of the outsider, it tells the story of local knowledge, time, and thought on and of the sea and the incorporation of livelihood in relation to toponymy. The fisherman is the artist, stating and reinstating ideas on the landscape. The method of the fieldworker to access these memories determines how the art of the landscape is perceived. Fieldwork and questioning examine a part of the toponymic mind not normally accessed when people are not aware of these names. Accessing and having contact with these names and memories and thought patterns are what toponymic fieldwork as art is all about.

Historically, the fieldworker is posed as the scientist rather than the artist, because he collects data; he is a part of his own evidence that is used to establish and test hypotheses. Turning the research scientist into a research artist appears to go against the methods and theory of the social sciences as these scientific approaches try to earn validity through their allegiances to the natural sciences. The writer’s

influence is removed. Still, social science is precise. Social scientists collect data and hypothesise about real (human) happenings in the real world. They seek to test their hypotheses in concrete world situations where the natural sciences generally do not dare go. This is the artistic and creative aspect of this endeavour. Art does not use evidence and facts; it uses emotions, techniques, and compositions to create awareness-made-real in the world.

Just as the visual artist gets access to parts of his own mind through artistic practice, the toponymic fieldworker, or 'toponymic artist', gets access to areas of the namer's mind and apprehension through the acquisition of names. This is an aesthetic (ad)venture involving the creative writing of history into the mental landscape projected onto an actual physical landscape. Here the canvas is metaphorically the map. Just as Carter (1988) claims that history does not exist prior to the existence of a map or naming, I claim that prior to the creation of a map, an aesthetic landscape does not exist for the mapped place. This does not necessarily have to be a written map; it could equally be a mind map or cognitive map.

I interviewed fishermen on islands who well knew the seas they plied. These maritime tracts are a memory within time-space and language. Some had knowledge of fishing ground names which resembled songlines. Placenames are the aural manifestation of such traditions. These represent lines of art in the hydrographic landscape of the islands to which they are connected. The collector of these songs and names is engaging in an aesthetic venture, solidifying a person's explicit or implicit awareness of the language he possesses. Do art, and toponymic maps as art, exist if they are not being observed and 'used'? Even if the fieldworker is not researching and is merely 'observing' the surroundings, I believe this is also art. Fieldwork requires large amounts of time and mental space for problem recognition, the determination of interview strategies, for thinking, and for contemplation.

FRIENDSHIP AND FIELDWORK ON ISLANDS: FROM SCIENCE AND DISTANCE TO ART AND AESTHETICS

In order to establish the social networks needed to acquire data for analysis in the actual places where language and placenames (toponyms) exist, and therefore derive their meaning, there is a requirement to spend time in and understand the workings of the people who possess linguistic and toponymic knowledge. Because of the remoteness and insularity of the cultures and communities with whom I had interacted, time was required to garner trust and interest in the role of language documentation in broader language and cultural documentation work. These methodological accounts have consequences for the aesthetics of fieldwork and the creation of pilgrimage-driven creative and awareness-inculcating pursuits in linguistics.

The insularity of both communities in the field locations quickly became apparent. Although I am an Australian male, as a rank outsider it took time to gain trust and establish friendships with knowledgeable and reliable informants. This took considerably more time and involved different activities on Norfolk Island than on Dudley Peninsula. The difference between the two field locations emphasised the need for sympathy towards local social norms and patterns of behaviour. On Norfolk Island, it was essential for me, initially, to engage in hard physical work in parallel with conducting linguistic research. This was because being accepted and liked by key Norfolk Island community members – custodians of the Norfolk Islander ethos – was integral to gaining access to toponymic data. On Dudley Peninsula, I did not undertake any notable physical work, but still managed to gain access to a group of local residents with extensive toponymic knowledge. 'Getting in with the in-crowd' is not solely aesthetic but simultaneously scientific; science and art, friendship and self, insider and outsider, good work and one's best work. People were more aware of the importance of their toponymic language on Norfolk Island than on Dudley Peninsula. Fieldwork helped reveal much of the awareness and knowledge people had of these toponyms.

Along with traditional linguistic-data-gathering techniques, I have realised that it is imperative that a congenial rapport is established early on in fieldwork dealings, otherwise little will happen by way of language documentation which specifically focuses on the cultural saliency of language in relation to a particular place. Because of the strict demarcation between insider and outsider in the interpretation of the sociology of knowledge in the two island environments I studied, there is the need to value symbiotic fieldworker/language community relationships.

This perspective holds that sustained contact, conducting research affably, and that interpersonal dealings, the establishment of friendship, and even the exchanging of gifts are what constitute a good fieldwork process. This creative fieldwork methodology considers factors that traditional linguistic fieldwork considers extraneous. Moreover, it claims that fieldwork and the fieldworker are interacting with the social and natural ecology of where/when the language is spoken, and that the aim is an understanding of the significance of the locally specific categories and processes as this significance is revealed through interaction. These stories and the interaction between people, place, language, and questions of an outsider narrate what happened historically on Norfolk Island and Dudley Peninsula vis-à-vis toponyms. Like Franses' (2013: 457) proposition "that modern art painters make their best works at the optimal moment in their lives, a moment that could then be associated with the Divine proportion", I speculate that while a linguist's or a cartographer's best work is never done, when this point of creativity and aesthetic engagement is attained, certain heights of inventive achievement and accessing of high quality language awareness can be consummated. Although one could posit that it is probably for the world rather than the researcher himself to decide when or where one does one's best work, a degree of critical self-awareness must result from the artist-fieldworker's encounter with data, science, art, and aesthetics. As Lindauer (1992, 1993) posited, perhaps the creativity of artists – here linguists and cartographers – will lead to one's best work coming later in life.

ONE'S BEST WORK

Prior to beginning my stint as a postdoctoral fellow focusing on the toponymy of Pitcairn Island – an island inherently connected to Norfolk Island through shared linguistic and cultural history – I reasoned that after producing my first individually published book (Nash 2013), my best work was now done. I had had the time-space to reflect in a way which could now be considered to be naïve, but with a naïveté which inspired the creative process of melding art, science, and emotion. With the pressure and grind of annual reviews, administration, and the need to complete a PhD degree now past, and with the skills that I now possess (which should enable me not to squander time and energy in the field), it would seem that I am in a more abled position to do even better linguistic and creative work. I am now 41 years and three months old, almost on par with the average age of 41.92 years Franses (2013) ascertained in his sample of painters, and around three years younger than the average of 44.75 years for Franses' (2014) Nobel laureate authors. As one colleague intimated to me: "you should have started or finished your life's work before you turn 45." I intend to report on the results of my present creative pursuits in this journal on or before my forty-fifth birthday. Maybe I will better my previous work, maybe I will not.

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