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Toponymy and ecolinguistics

Posted on 13 November 2013 by joshuanash — 2 Comments

Joshua Nash
University of Adelaide

Ecolinguistics can be divided into two strands. The first deals with environmental discourse analysis, often termed eco-critical discourse analysis, critical ecolinguistics, or the language of ecology and environmentalism, while the second, language ecology, which deals with interactions between humans, mind, and environment, is often expressed through lexico-grammatical studies of how humans talk about and adapt linguistically to new and foreign environments. This second strand is also referred to as the ecology of language. I will not be overly concerned with the first strand.

Since its beginnings in the 1980s and 1990s, ecolinguistics has grown into a research field in its own right, although the boundaries of what ecolinguistic analysis is and how one should go about doing ecolinguistic research have not been made explicit by scholars working in the field. The linguistic community has also questioned the relevance of ecolinguistics as a subdiscipline and on what theoretical ground ecolinguistics actually stands (e.g. Edwards 2008; Ostler 2001; Owen 2004). There have also been several critical voices concerning various aspects of ecolinguistic research (e.g. Goddard 1996; Siegel 1997). With the exception of Garner (2005), scholars and theoreticians have not been explicit enough in stating the theoretical breadth of ecolinguistics and its practical implications for general linguistic theory.

Ecolinguistics provides several conceptual questions. I am concerned with one major empirical question: How can relationships involving people, language, place, and names be measured empirically? Research in linguistics has generally focused on linguistic structure decontextualised from the environment in which the language is spoken. Sociolinguistic research has contributed significantly to an understanding of language use and language in social context just as ecolinguistics has created awareness of language as an ecological phenomenon (Haugen 1972).

Some ecolinguistic research has focused on more obscure issues, to the extent that some would claim much of what is in the interest range of ecolinguistics does not concern linguistics at all. Regardless, there is a need for contextually sensitive empirical analyses which ask questions about interrelationships concerning language, culture, and the natural environment without being alienated from mainstream linguistics. Broad philosophical analyses of the relationship between lexicon and environmental management are important in their own right. However, it

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linguistic ecologies (e.g. toponyms).

There is a distinct lack 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 be analysed. Such an approach will not only emphasise the efficacy of the structural analysis but will also accentuate the multitude of cultural and ecological parameters necessary to consider when conducting an ecolinguistic analysis of toponyms.

In what follows, I reflect on elements relevant to an ecolinguistic consideration of toponymy. These reflections are based on my linguistic fieldwork conducted on Norfolk Island, South Pacific, where Norf'k is spoken and used in toponymy (Nash 2013). Sapir (1912: 231) illustrates how history is reflected in toponyms:

> Only 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 of 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 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.

The idea that linguistic practices are detachable from the world suggests one can distinguish between two prototypical language types: (1) ecologically embedded languages, and (2) disconnected languages. These are idealised types and in reality most languages are a complex mix between being constructed by their environment and constructing their environment (Mühlhäusler 2003: 2). However, such a split between conceptions of what languages are is useful in an empirical analysis. An ecologically embedded language should exhibit the following properties:

1. Words reflect social interaction between humans and their environment, e.g. Moo-oo Stone on Norfolk Island is an offshore rock formation with a large amount of moo-oo, or native Norfolk flax; Dar Fig Valley is the name of a valley where locals used to grow figs; Deep Water is a fishing location on the east coast known for the depth of the water in this area.

2. Lexical and grammatical forms are not regarded as arbitrary, e.g. the toponym Johnny Nigger Bun Et (English: Johnny Nigger Burnt It) as a grammatical unit is a sentence. It expresses an idiosyncratic Norfolk personal name form, i.e. 'Johnny Nigger' remembers the uncontrolled burning of a coastal area by an American whaler who came to live on Norfolk in the 1800s.

3. The same word can be used to describe human and other life forms, e.g. the Norf'k horg (pig, hog) is used to describe animals, humans and even the name of a fishing location. Dar Horg is named after a terrestrial feature which resembles a pig from the sea.

4. The lexicon and grammar of space reflects topography, e.g. Out ar Station is in a distant location on Norfolk; Up in a Stick is topographically 'up' in comparison to the administrative centre of Norfolk which is 'down'.

5. Language is a memory of past interactions between humans and nature, e.g. Gun Pit is a concrete structure on the west coast of Norfolk built during World War II. It is also the name of the fishing ground Ar Gun Pit which uses Gun Pit in one of its marks. A

use.

An understanding of the interrelated phenomena can be achieved by interacting in real-world situations, with members of the respective speech communities living in the actual ecology where the language is spoken and used every day. Names associated with tourism on Norfolk (Hibiscus Lodge, Daydreamer Holiday Apartments, Fletcher Christian Apartments, Bligh Court) show how history affects naming. The vision of Norfolk as an island paradise is reflected in these names. This ecocritical (re-)construction of Norfolk is seen in many domains of naming including the reintroduction of Polynesian names and a distinct absence of Australian anthroponyms.

An ecolinguistic point of view considers toponyms as important cultural and environmental artefacts 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 the world) is revealed (e.g. Pouderoux et al. 2007, cf. Mark et al. 2011's volume *Landscape in Language*). Ecolinguistics provides a basis upon which the analysis of this cross-disciplinary mix of linguistic, social, and environmental relationships can be undertaken. An ecolinguistic analysis provides a philosophical and conceptual framework for what I believe can result in a more accurate and detailed description of toponyms in their historical, social, and ecological context.

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2 comments on "Toponymy and ecolinguistics"

Will Sheard says:
16 November 2013 at 1:00 am

I saw your post on the Ecolinguistics post. Shameless self-promotion is really a professional necessity these days! Yours is an interesting topic. Several names local to my home town of Congleton, UK spring to mind:

Tegg's Nose – http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tegg%27s_Nose

Bosley Cloud, commonly referred to as "the Cloud", a name that has always interested me – http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bosley_Cloud

The Roaches, which, somewhat surprisingly perhaps, draws its name from the French for "rocks" – http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Roaches

I can't help but think of moutaintop removal, too. This, of course, is the generic way to refer to deeply damaging extraction processes. I wonder how readers' views would change on the removal if toponyms were used in place of the generic (e.g. "The mining company intends to remove the top of Tegg's Nose" – a grotesque geological rhinoplasty!).

Reply

joshuanash says:

Thanks for your response and the links, Will. Self promotion is always a way to go. You never know, I might end up with a toponym accredited to my name somewhere in the world. _____

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