

Toponymy on Norfolk Island, South Pacific: The Microcosm of Nepean Island¹

Joshua Nash
Australia

Abstract

Norfolk Island, South Pacific provides linguists a near laboratory case study in naming, language contact and environmental management. The two languages spoken on the island, Norfolk – the language of the descendants of the Pitcairners – and English, are both used in placenaming. This study analyses the toponyms of Nepean Island, a small uninhabitable island 800 metres south of Norfolk, and poses the question of whether Nepean is a microcosm of naming behaviour for the rest of the Norfolk macrocosm. For its size Nepean Island offers a large number of toponyms and suggests a toponymic template applicable to the Norfolk archipelago as a whole. This analysis offers some results one is likely to get from doing toponymic research on uninhabited island environments.

1. Introduction

Norfolk Island, a remote isolated island in the south west Pacific Ocean 1,700 kilometres from Sydney, provides toponymists and linguists a near laboratory case study in naming, toponymy and language change (see Figure 1 location map). Norfolk's isolation and colourful history provides researchers the opportunity to observe naming behaviour in a controlled environment over starkly defined and varied historical periods. The arrival of the Pitcairners on the island in 1856 and the previous uses of the island for agriculture and the British Isles' most notorious penal settlement give a snapshot of language ecology and a prototypical example of the ability of humans to adapt linguistically to a foreign situation.



Figure 1. Norfolk Island location map

The present paper looks at toponyms as a tool for humans to understand and utilise a hitherto unknown environment. A previously unresearched microcosm, Nepean Island, of the Norfolk macrocosm is presented as a possible template to arrive at some general principles of placenaming on Norfolk. A smaller geographical area and particularly an uninhabited area allows:

1. A perceivably and bounded project situated in time and space.
2. The possibility to ask very precise and strong research questions.
3. The possibility of precisely monitoring environmental change over short and long time spans.

Nepean Island (Figure 2) lies approximately 800 metres to the south of Norfolk Island's administrative centre Kingston. Despite its size Nepean is an important element in the Norfolk landscape; its grassy undulating topography is clearly visible from most vantage points on the southern region of Norfolk. The 200 Norfolk Island pines that used to cover the island are since gone and the physical makeup of the island bears scars from the first two penal settlements, particularly the Second Settlement when sandstone quarrying resulted in the well-known convict steps on the eastern side of the island. The island has had other uses namely fishing and collecting of Whale Bird eggs. Aside from much research into the natural history of Nepean (see references to Nepean Island in Endersby (2003)), management plans for the inclusion of Nepean as a public reserve (Norfolk Island Parks & Forestry Service 2003) and a brief rambler's guide to Norfolk (Hoare 1994), no known documentation of the toponyms of Nepean Island has ever been undertaken.



Figure 2. The Norfolk Archipelago

On a recent visit to Norfolk interviews were conducted with members of the community. A taxonomy of placenames was established comprising:

1. Toponyms
2. Fishing ground names
3. Diving site names

It is the first element of this taxonomy that is the focus of the current paper.

2. A brief history of Nepean Island

Although there are various possibilities Nepean was most likely named after Evan Nepean, the undersecretary for the Home Office, shortly after the beginning of the First Settlement in 1788. Nepean is a small island of approximately 10 hectares that is not volcanic in origin like the other islands in the Norfolk archipelago but was formed during the last two ice ages ending around 12,000 years ago from windblown sand dunes (Green 1973). Due to its tidal patterns and the east-west rip on the northern part of the island, Nepean is a difficult place to access and apart from occasional natural history research, e.g., tracking of Masked Boobies, gathering of Whale Bird eggs and fishing, the island is rarely visited.

The original vegetation of the island has now been reduced to a low-lying cover consisting mainly of grasses and coastal herbs that are tolerant to the exposed windy conditions. Various weeds such as Poison Weed have occurred on the Island (Green 1973) and this may be one possible etymology of the toponym *Poison Bay*. Apart from the natural history of the island, the most notable aspect of human intervention is the convict quarry site on the eastern side of the island (Figure 3). These post holes and steps, though greatly weathered since the abandonment of the quarry during the Second Settlement (1815–1855), are still visible and are still utilised for access to higher ground on Nepean.



Figure 3. Nepean Island topography

Besides this human intervention and the removal of the original forest cover, it appears that toponymically Nepean Island has been named based on its:

1. Topography,
2. Absolute spatial orientation and direction, and
3. Events that have taken place here.

Whether this taxonomy is representative of the entire Norfolk macrocosm forms a larger part of the thesis of the current analysis.

3. Language, Norfolk and environmental management

The history of Norfolk Island and indeed Nepean Island is intertwined with the major sociocultural movements that have occurred on the island since it was discovered and named in honour of the Norfolk family by Captain Cook in 1774. Norfolk's history is generally divided into four major periods (Rickard 1995: 481):

1. The first convict settlement of 1788–1814;
2. The “planned Hell” of the second convict settlement;
3. The relocation in 1856 of the entire population of Pitcairn Island to Norfolk Island;
4. The Anglican Melanesian Mission has its headquarters stationed on Norfolk from 1866 – 1920.

Linguistically Norfolk provides a prototypical case study in naming and environmental management. Observing and studying the naming and management practices of a population in a foreign environment elucidates the priorities of this group and nowhere is the consonance between language as an environmental management tool and the actual work this tool actually does as important as in small island environments. Environmental change and mismanagement in locales like Norfolk Island occur relatively quickly compared to less isolated areas while simultaneously the parameters of change, e.g., population increase, introduced species, lack of knowledge of the new surroundings, can be monitored in much greater detail.

In the case of Norfolk, there have been at least two languages in contact with the Norfolk environment, i.e., English and Norfolk.² Norfolk is a mixed language of eighteenth century nautical English and Tahitian spoken by the descendents of the Pitcairners who arrived on Norfolk in 1856. The language has been documented in some detail (Harrison 1972, 1986), its linguistic status described (Laycock 1989; Mühlhäusler 1998) and an attempt at a standardised orthography has been provided by Buffett (1999). The various varieties of Norfolk and their interaction with English have been described by Harrison (1985) and a preliminary toponymic analysis of Norfolk and English placenames on Norfolk Island has been given by Mühlhäusler (2002b). The current analysis is based in initial fieldwork and tentative research questions forming the basis of a Ph.D. project on the toponymic history of Norfolk. As a part of a longitudinal study of the language and culture of Norfolk Island this Ph.D. project aims to:

1. To document the placenames and history of placenaming on Norfolk Island which was uninhabited prior to 1788.
2. To present a generalizable methodology for doing placename research on previously uninhabited island environments.

Nepean Island is hypothesised as a snapshot of this possible interaction between language, naming and environment and it presents a small scale and manageable toponymic case in point.

4. Research questions

The following research questions were tested on the resultant corpus of Nepean toponyms:

- 1) Is the Norfolk language used in naming the toponyms on Nepean Island?
- 2) What constitutes a (pure) Norfolk toponym?
- 3) Are there dual names (doublets) for toponyms on Nepean Island?
- 4) Could these data represent a microcosm of naming behaviour applicable to the Norfolk macrocosm?

5. Methods

Data concerning the toponymy of Nepean Island was collected during fieldwork on Norfolk Island in February 2008. This involved approximately five informal interviews with members of the Norfolk Island community and subsequent follow up questionnaires based on a more precise list of placenames derived from archival research and the initial interviews. As per above, three elements in the classification of placenames of Nepean Island arose out of this process, one of which was analysed in detail, i.e., toponyms.

6. Results

Table 1 presents toponyms for Nepean Island acquired through interviews and archival research:

<i>Topographical toponyms</i>
East End
Stump
The Crack
The Saddle
The Skull
Under Stump
Unicorn
West End
<i>Historical toponyms</i>
Mary Hamilton Reef
Poison Bay
The Convict Steps (Em Steps)

Table 1 – Nepean Island toponyms

They are located geographically according to Figure 3 and Figure 4:

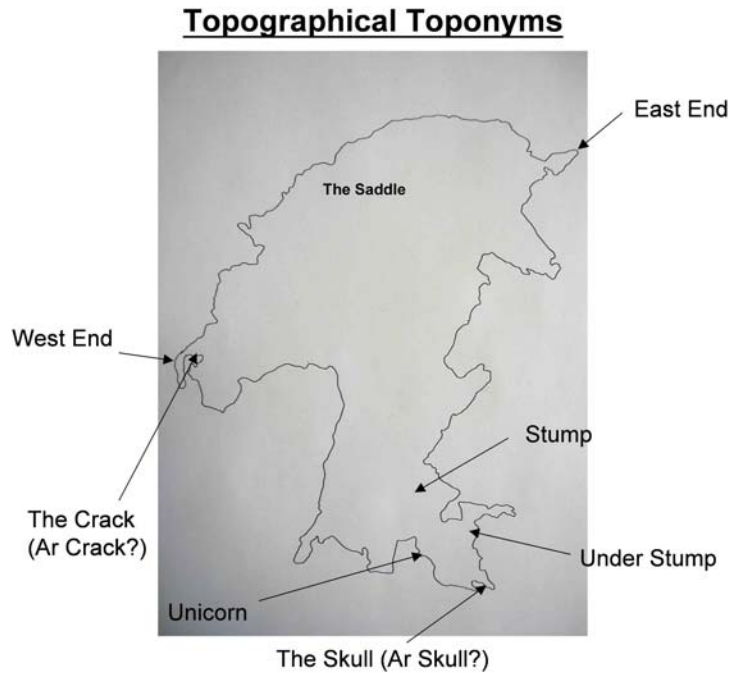


Figure 4 – Topographical Toponyms on Nepean Island

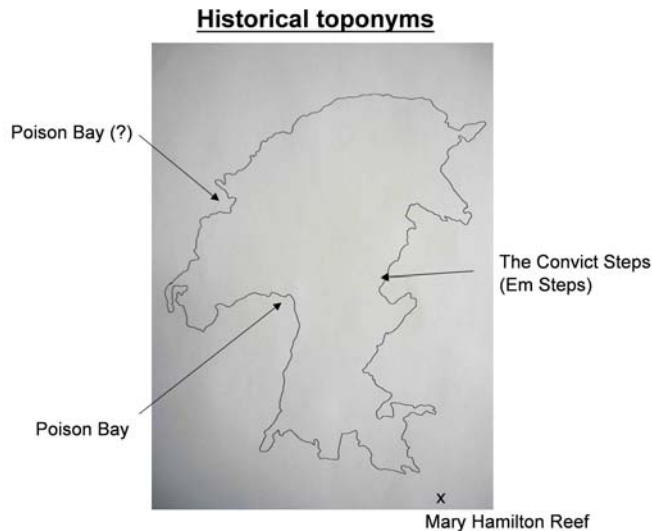


Figure 5 – Historical Toponyms on Nepean Island

Using these data I now refer to the first research question:

1) Is the Norf’k language used in naming the toponyms on Nepean Island?

In brief, the answer is yes. *The Convict Steps* are often referred to as *Em Steps* which uses a shortened form of the Norf’k *dem* (them, those, they). Pluralizing *step* to create *steps* is not typical for Norf’k, as the language generally does not pluralize nouns, but this may have arisen for any number of reasons, e.g., it is possible this toponym was originally an English toponym and it was adopted into Norf’k and thus kept the plural.

It is contentious whether *Stump*, *Under Stump*, *Unicorn* and *Poison Bay* are Norf’k toponyms or not. My informants often pronounced these in Norf’k and even included them in Norf’k

sentences. Furthermore, the ability for *Stump* and *Unicorn* to take the Norfolk specific definite article *Dar* and/or non-specific definite article *Ar* would suggest that these are or potentially can be Norfolk toponyms. *Poison Bay* and the variant spelling ‘bieh’ (bay) in Buffett’s (1999) system suggests that *Poison Bay* could also be considered a Norfolk toponym. *Poison Bay* could also be considered a Norfolk toponym if its etymology is associated with the Norfolk names for the plant ‘poison weed’ or with the wind named ‘poison wind’ which blows from east to west along the north coast of Nepean.

As regards the second research question:

2) *What constitutes a (pure) Norfolk toponym?*

the answer is simply: don’t know. The historical facet of naming places on Nepean Island has not been researched in detail as yet and I also did not question my informants in detail as to when the places were named and by whom. In order to establish what a pure Norfolk toponym is would require:

1. Knowledge of when the place was named. If it was before 1856 it cannot by definition be an original Norfolk toponym as Norfolk was not spoken on Norfolk until the arrival of the Pitcairners in 1856.
2. A more precise understanding of the continuum of Norfolk-English pronunciation pragmatics, Norfolk phonology and the pragmatics of Norfolk naming, i.e., is *The Saddle* or merely *Saddle* pronounced with Norfolk articulation regardless of the etymology of the toponym a Norfolk or an English toponym? Can pre-1856 toponyms thus be considered Norfolk toponyms if pronounced in Norfolk?

I have previously addressed the difficulty of arriving at a reliable inventory of Norfolk phonology (Nash 2008a). Individual and inter-familial pronunciation and semantic variation in Norfolk renders the question of what constitutes a Norfolk word or toponym extremely difficult both linguistically and even politically.

Considering the third research question:

3) *Are there dual names (doublets) for toponyms on Nepean Island?*

there is at least one doublet – (*The Convict Steps* (English) and *Em Steps* (Norfolk) – and I suspect that *The Crack* and *The Skull* can also be represented in their Norfolk equivalents of *Dar/Ar Crack* and *Dar/Ar Skull*. Once again, the use of *dar* (specific definite article) and *ar* (non-specific definite article) depends on various aspects of Norfolk grammar which as yet with reference to toponyms is not totally understood. This apparently simple aspect of Norfolk grammar seems to become extremely complex when viewed with precision and much inter-individual and inter-familial variation takes place within the small Norfolk speech community. This clear-cut example of the grammatical aspect of toponyms on Norfolk Island with specific reference to Nepean Island illustrates the difficulty in classification of toponyms and furthermore classifying contact languages into precise boundaries (Mühlhäusler 1998). Much more interaction and data collection with the Norfolk Island community is required before an acceptable thesis concerning this aspect of Norfolk grammar is arrived at.

The fourth research question concerns whether Nepean Island is a representative toponymic snapshot of the Norfolk macrocosm:

4) *Could these data represent a microcosm of naming behaviour applicable to the Norfolk macrocosm?*

Nepean Island does present some generalities that seem to apply to doing toponymic research on Norfolk Island proper. A generic division of toponyms on Nepean is applicable to Norfolk, save street and road names and house and hotel names as Nepean has no possibility for such. The

typology of toponyms, fishing ground names and diving site names and their analysis seems to do a fair amount of work toward understanding Norfolk placenames. It seems that Nepean is a 'mini Norfolk' vis-à-vis the human activities carried out thereon, i.e., it is a toponymic document of human history and events. It also expresses the possibility for the development of an absolute spatial orientation system in the Norfolk language (cf. Nash 2008b). These facets of Norfolk toponymy mean that using a minimal data set and asking strong questions yields good results as well as generating further questions.

7. Conclusion

This paper has asked the question: how do humans name a small uninhabited island? In the case of Nepean Island, an island that is uninhabitable due to lack of running water, this question has even more weight and expresses what tools humans use to utilise, understand and describe a type of small 'no-man's land' though one that is very important for the cultural and environmental history of Norfolk Island.

Nepean does express a snapshot of naming practices for the rest of the Norfolk macrocosm primarily because:

1. The Norfolk language is used,
2. Toponyms reflect dramatically the sociocultural and ecological history of the island,
3. The microtoponymy of Nepean reflects the fuzziness and lack of boundaries in results when data is exposed to very focussed observation, i.e., from a distance things look simple, from close up they become extremely complex.

Whether these research findings are of great importance to Norfolk Island as a whole requires further investigation in comparison to:

1. Other toponymic parameters on Nepean Island such as diving site names and (offshore) fishing ground names,
2. More precise general principles of naming and toponymy found on Norfolk Island, e.g., the relationship between events and naming, resource utilisation and naming, official and unofficial names and language choice and naming behaviour.

This initial documentation of Nepean toponyms has provided:

1. A taxonomy of toponyms,
2. A methodology for data collection, i.e., interviews, archival research, and the anticipated results one is likely to get,
3. Principles for further linguistic analysis of toponyms, e.g., syntactic analysis (use of articles) and phonological analysis (whether a word is considered Norfolk or English and whether it is pronounced in Norfolk or English).

These principles and the process of data collection and compilation form a major facet of the process of documenting the toponymic history of Norfolk Island. The methodology and taxonomy of this project provide a strong template for toponymists and linguists to replicate similar research on previously uninhabited island environments. In this regard the contribution Norfolk Island makes to our understanding of relationships between language, environment and human beings is invaluable.

Notes

1. I am grateful to Bevan McCoy, Owen and Beryl Evans and Albert Buffett for their assistance during data collection on Norfolk Island in February 2008.

2. Mota, the lingua franca of the Melanesian Mission, and the Pidgin English that was possibly spoken in the boarding school on the island, is believed to have been a linguistic isolate (Mühlhäusler 2002a) and its effect on the then and resultant language ecology of Norfolk is not well documented or understood. For this reason any possible naming behaviour associated with the Melanesian Mission will not be considered for this analysis.

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Joshua Nash
 University of Adelaide
 4 / 47 Cliff Street
 5045 Gleneig East, SA
 AUSTRALIA
 joshua.nash@adelaide.edu.au