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NAMING THE AQUAPELAGO

Reconsidering Norfolk Island fishing ground names

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Abstract

Fishing ground names are an understudied taxon in toponymy. By reviewing the author's recent consideration of this toponym taxon, this article claims that an aesthetic appreciation of fishing ground names and their emplacement as linguistic and cultural ephemera is warranted within Island Studies and recent scholarship in aquapelagos.

Key words

Toponymy, fishing ground names, language aesthetics, linguistic fieldwork, toponymic ethnography, aquapelago

Launch

When I first lived in Arviat [Canada], the sea was a blank space to me. I did not know the names of the headlands, the reefs, the islands, or the other places along the coastline. I did not know the stories associated with the sea, and I had no personal experiences on the sea. In the beginning I was utterly confused. My journeys on the open water or sea ice were disorienting. I did not know where I was or where I was going, and I relied completely on the hunters with whom I travelled. However, as time moved on, I began to develop an understanding of the sea. I became familiar with the places along the coastline, and I began to hear the stories that were situated in specific places. I began to make connections between these places, and I began to have memorable experiences of my own in specific places at sea. (Tyrell, 2006: 228)

Since the completion of a longitudinal study in Norfolk Island toponymy, I have reconsidered and published several conceptual and descriptive articles dealing with various placename taxa and their relevance to Island Studies and the toponymy of and on islands. The toponym taxon I reconsider here is Norfolk Island fishing grounds (see Nash 2011: 136-145 for details) and specifically how fishing grounds, island toponymy and 'insular toponymies' can be used to further theoretical debate on aquapelagos (Hayward, 2012 and respondents) and the creation of 'sea as places' (Maxwell, 2012) through naming. In addition, I reflect on the role toponyms, as linguistic and cultural

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artefacts, and toponymic fieldwork in island environments, as a dynamic and interactional process, play in constructing the aquapelago and its geographical and cultural components as an artistic and aesthetic pursuit. The role of toponyms as constructors of the social memory of language within the aesthetic domain (cf Cavanagh's 2009 'social aesthetics of language') has not been given sufficient emphasis in language documentation, toponymy or Island Studies literature. Further, the position of fishing grounds in a linguistic and topographical description of coastal and island environments has not received much attention in linguistics or Island Studies (see Nash 2009, 2011 for a detailed presentation of relevant fishing ground name literature).

The Australian External Territory of Norfolk Island is an archipelago consisting of three islands: Norfolk (35 km²), Nepean (1 km²) and Phillip (5 km²) together with fringing islets. Because of multiple occupations, the 'world of Norfolk – small world, no small wonder' (Norfolk Island tourism slogan, 2010) has a varied linguistic history. Quoting Ronström (2009: 179), the Norfolk archipelago like "any 'world of islands' is also a linguistic archipelago: a 'world of words'". During fieldwork on Norfolk Island, I have collected more than 1000 placenames and a current dictionary project at the University of Adelaide for the Pitkern and Norfolk languages combined has documented more than 3000 lexical entries. Small islands offer a lot not only to linguists but also to other disciplines interested in word histories and the emplacement of names within island, insular and/or aquapelagic landscapes.

What I present is a possibility where, like the official creation and naming of marine parks for the protection of natural habitats in Australia and the Pacific, the documentation of fishing ground names and their parallel cultural process can contribute to a writing of the toponymic ethnography of an island people. That is, fishing ground names as toponyms provide a means through which we can garner a greater understanding of the linguistic activity of the people who used these names to describe the ways they spoke on the sea; they are important cultural economic and ethnographic processes and events. I review Nash (2009) and consider additional Norfolk Island data in light of recent debates in *Shima*. Among other projects of mine dealing with insularity, I also re-evaluate the position of placenames in writing about (island) peoples, and how this is related to conducting toponymic field research with speakers of island (contact) languages in Australia, the Pacific and elsewhere. This article should be relevant not only to nissologists and island researchers but also to linguists, toponymists and (Pacific) ethnographers.

Processes

The data I present was collected on four fieldtrips to Norfolk Island between 2007 and 2009. Because there were no commonly available fishing ground maps in the Norfolk Island community, all names (n=73) were collected through interviews with five Norfolk Island fishermen. The names, locations and marks of fishing grounds resulted in an offshore map of Norfolk Island incorporating both the plotting of locations to names (Figure 1) and documenting the history of these names (see fishing ground name data in appendix in Nash, 2011: 261-384).

The method used to collect this data informs the inclusion of fishing ground names within the aquapelago construct. I consider, through engagement with a community, the

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(linguistic and island) fieldworker engages in an artistic and aesthetic endeavour similar to Wolcott's (2005) description in *The Art of Fieldwork*; ie through being admitted into private cultural realms of linguistic, social and toponymic engagement, the fieldworker as a map-maker participates in creating an artistic interpretation of placenames as artefacts within the aquapelago. Indeed, the 'no-place' nature of fishing ground names and their 're-imaginings' of space, place, and language in terms of the geographical and cultural location within island systems in the sea means they embody the idea of the aquapelago and can help to add to discussions and re-formations of what may constitute an aquapelago. The 'map as art' concept (Harmon, 2009) is also applied to toponymic maps.



Figure 1 - Norfolk Island fishing ground names map (source: the author 2011)

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Figure 2 – Fishing ground names in The Passage (source: the author 2011)

Scrutiny

As the creator and compiler of this map, I was concerned to an extent with the accuracy of the spaces and places these names represent. However, on reviewing my emotional response to this map more than a year after it was first compiled and published, it is clearer that, like Cavanaugh (2009: 11), what I perceive as “the interweaving of culturally and emotionally felt dimensions of language use” and the way affective and aesthetic stances toward linguistic form - in this case fishing ground names - does necessitate the claim that “people nearly always feel what they speak”. Besides the feeling and striving for place-creation these names evoke in the bestower and knower of these names, the aesthetic placement as a map, and the artistic impression of these names as archipelagic points existing within the aquapelago as a whole, and the grammar of names, ‘paint a picture with words’. It is this ‘grammar of the landscape’, the aquatic landscape within the archipelago, which I claim is not only an aesthetic activity for linguistics but also a ‘linguistic aestheticising’ of Island Studies in terms of what the aquapelago is.

I consider a part of the map with a high concentration of names and cultural importance in The Passage (Figure 2). Because of the use of spatial descriptors in two of these names (Down ar Graveyard, Out orn ar Melky Tree), I relate my analysis to Ronström’s (2011) orientational metaphors vis-à-vis island words, island worlds, and the “underlying politics of some prepositions denoting position and how they can be used to mark differences, belongings, and identities” (228). Like Ronström, I believe that “islands are set off as different from other types of inhabited places is how they are positioned in a discursive order by certain orientational metaphorical constructions” (ibid). However, where I build on Ronström’s idea is not only in how prepositions are used to define

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social and political space, but how prepositions represent small scale linguistic ‘ideas’ that can be represented artistically and mapped. The use of ‘out’, ‘down’ or ‘up’ (Up the Norwest – Figure 1) are not necessarily only ‘metaphorical constructions’ – they also offer a spatial insight into methods the Norfolk Islanders used to relate language, names, water and space together in their island words for their world.

Language aesthetics and the Norf’k language

Within a frame and perspective of time (fishing is not as common on Norfolk Island today as it was) and space (many of the fishing ground names have been forgotten), Figure 2 is a cartographic and artistic representation that would be difficult ever to ‘paint’ again. During my fieldwork, several knowledgeable Norfolk Island fishermen passed away and took large amounts of linguistic and location knowledge of fishing ground names with them. The elements of Norf’k, the language spoken by the descendants of the *Bounty* mutineers and their Tahitian counterparts on Norfolk Island, present in fishing ground names in The Passage (*ar/dar* [the], *offie* [trevally fish], *orn* [on]) are connected to the island’s reef geography (fishing ground names commonly refer to reefs). In turn, these Norf’k lexemes are linked through water and aquapelagic space to fishing history and island/insular behaviour. The combination of Norf’k and English words and grammar create a palette that Norfolk Island fishermen have used to make the subconscious linguistic and the aesthetic culturally conscious.

As aesthetes of the water, the stakeholders of island space, and users of their language as a descriptive and playful tool, I have documented Norfolk Island fishermen’s ‘naming the sea’ as an aesthetic and visual statement. In this example, natural, ecological, cultural, and linguistic ‘art’ is documented within the aquapelagic space. Within this aesthetics of language speaking, language creation and language documentation in island spaces, linguistic data becomes art and the (island) field researcher becomes an artist and map-maker. Toponyms are the colours, the map the canvas, the map-maker the painter, the territory the aquapelago, and the observer the audience to the art.

Out

This polemical speculation has extended the island aquapelago debate and considered the aesthetic role and appeal of language in landscape and how toponyms add to this discussion. I have put forward several points of contention for fieldwork practice, language documentation and interpretation, and methods by which island scholars and small (island) contact language scholars may interpret their linguistic and ethnographic data from a more developed aesthetic angle. The fact that appreciation of the aesthetic appeal of hardcore linguistic data has not received much attention in linguistics is not surprising. Linguists have striven to validate their discipline scientifically, with the label of ‘social science’ lessening the validity of linguistics in comparison to other disciplines in the natural sciences. Putting an artistic turn on linguistic and toponymic research as a scientific endeavour places the fieldworker and researcher at the centre of ‘the fieldwork picture’ and poses the linguistic scientist as an artist striving to understand relationships between sea, language, space, people, and names. It seems that ‘islands as aquapelagos’ and observing ‘insular toponymies’ provide good ground, and sea, upon which further considerations into this debate can be made.

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