



Language and landscape: a cross-linguistic perspective

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Abstract

This special issue is the outcome of collaborative work on the relationship between language and landscape, carried out in the Language and Cognition Group at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics. The contributions explore the linguistic categories of landscape terms and place names in nine genetically, typologically and geographically diverse languages, drawing on data from first-hand fieldwork. The present introductory article lays out the reasons why the domain of landscape is of central interest to the language sciences and beyond, and it outlines some of the major patterns that emerge from the cross-linguistic comparison which the papers invite. The data point to considerable variation within and across languages in how systems of landscape terms and place names are ontologised. This has important implications for practical applications from international law to modern navigation systems.

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1. Introduction

Many disciplines and specialist lines of research have been interested in human understandings of landscape, for example archaeology (Tilley, 1994), anthropology (Bender, 1993; Hirsch and O'Hanlon, 1995; Ellen and Fukui, 1996), psychology, philosophy and, of course, cognitive geography (Mark et al., 1999; Smith and Mark, 2001, 2003; Mark

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and Turk, 2003a, 2004). It is perhaps less obvious why this topic might be of any significant interest to linguistics. But a moment's reflection reveals a domain with wide ramifications through the linguistic sciences: How are landscape features selected as nameable objects ('river', 'mountain', 'cliff')? Are there universal categories? What is the relation between landscape terms (common nouns) and place names (proper nouns)? How translatable are landscape terms across languages, and what ontological categories do they commit to? Do they form structured sets of terms, semantic fields, with possible grammatical reflexes?

In the first part of the introduction to this special issue, we therefore lay out some of the reasons why this proves to be a fascinating domain for linguists, while in the second part we outline some of the interesting features that emerge from the cross-linguistic comparisons which the papers in this volume invite. We hope this collection of articles, which presents data from nine diverse languages, will play a pioneering role in establishing this topic in sustained linguistic discussions.

2. Landscape: an important but unexplored area of linguistics

Landscape, or more generally 'environment', provides an interesting domain of human categorisation and labelling for a number of reasons. First, just as everyone has a body (see the special issue of this journal edited by Majid et al., 2006), every human inhabits a landscape, even if the nature of that is highly variable. Just like the body, parts and categories rely on a segmentation of what is, from a topological point of view, largely a continuous surface – the division into parts is to a great extent imposed by our categories. In both cases, too, there is a sense in which we inhabit them, and ecologies have a profound influence on how we live. (Unlike the body, of course, environments differ dramatically, and landscapes offer no private access to their inner workings; landscapes are also less 'jointed', so they may offer greater opportunity for diverse ontologies).

A second point is that landscape (if understood to include the cityscapes in which half of humanity now lives) provides the fundamental 'Immobilien' of our worlds¹: it furnishes us with large, (almost) immovable entities and surfaces, with spatial and temporal constancy and three-dimensional complexity on a large scale. The landscape presents itself to the developing child as the backdrop for action, as a conceptual domain with its own spatial properties – one conceives of oneself as necessarily inside it, with the attendant puzzles of wayfinding and navigation (see Piaget and Inhelder, 1971). The Western mode of navigation, based on turns to the left or right, is adapted to dense systems of existing streets, roads and paths. Hunter-gatherers and others who live in less constructed landscapes tend to use non-egocentric systems of navigation, e.g., absolute abstract directions like north, south, east and west (Majid et al., 2004). These contrastive cognitive styles are reflected in language, which seems to play a causal role in inducing community-wide consensus for one style over the other – some languages do not even have directional terms for 'left' and 'right' (Levinson, 2003). In both kinds of wayfinding, though, landmarks play a crucial role – the essential Immobilien provided by our landscape cognition.

¹ The German term Immobilien for real estate captures some central properties of landscape features: their immobility and scale.

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