

When “what” is “where”: A linguistic analysis of landscape terms, place names and body part terms in Marquesan (Oceanic, French Polynesia)

Gabriele H. Cablitz *

*Institut für Allgemeine und Vergleichende Sprachwissenschaft, der Universität Kiel, Ohlshausenstr. 40,
24098 Kiel*

Dedicated to Godfrey Pitt

Abstract

This article describes how the topography of the Marquesas Islands is reflected in the Marquesan language (East Polynesian, Oceanic, Austronesian) and how speakers of Marquesan use their linguistic resources to orient themselves in their environment. It addresses the semantic and lexical relationships (taxonomic, antonymic/oppositional, paronymic, etc.) between landscape terms, place names and body part terms, and how linguistic resources are mapped onto the environment. Particular focus is placed on morphosyntactic aspects of landscape terms. Landscape features form an unusual ontological category because their status as ‘being objects’ or ‘being places’ is unclear [Lyons, J., 1977. *Semantics*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; Smith, B., Mark, D.M., 1998. *Ontology and geographic kinds*. In: Poiker, T.K., Chrisman, N. (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 8th International Symposium on Spatial Data Handling (SDH’98)*, pp. 308–320; Smith, B., Mark, D.M., 2001. *Geographical categories: an ontological investigation*. *International Journal of Geographical Information Science* 15 (7), 591–612]. Marquesan is interesting in this respect because speakers are sensitive to a “what” and a “where” category in their language when talking about spatial relations. Classification of landscape terms is examined in this context. Furthermore, the article compares landscape terms with body part terms because studies of grammaticalisation of locatives also deal with the issue of when and how a body part term (a “what”) becomes a marker of location (a “where”). As will be shown, the grammaticalisation of body part terms to locatives reflects a similar kind of ambiguity as observed in Marquesan landscape terms.

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* Tel.: +49 4318802669; fax: +49 4318807405.

E-mail address: gcablitz@linguistik.uni-kiel.de

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1. Introduction

1.1. General outline of article

After discussing some basic aspects of the notions ‘object’ and ‘place’, an introduction into the topography of the Marquesas Islands, the genetic affiliation and some typological characteristics of the Marquesan languages will be given. This introduction is followed by two major parts. In the first part a discussion and overview of Marquesan landscape terms and place names are undertaken in showing that the naming of places is often related to the labels of geographical entities or landscape features. It will be further discussed in which way the common definition of proper names of places (cf. Lyons, 1977; Lerner and Zimmermann, 1991) is problematic.

The second part of the article focuses on the linguistic marking and morphosyntactic construction types of landscape terms in relation to other location-denoting nominals such as place names and local nouns. Despite the fact that there is a relation of semantic labelling between place names and landscape terms in Marquesan, this section discusses the ontological status of landscape terms showing that we are dealing with an ontological “in-between” category. As Marquesans are sensitive to a “what”- and “where”-category in their language when talking about spatial relations, the linguistic distinction will be a basis of analysis of how landscape features are perceived and conceptualised. Finally, the analysis of the ontological status of landscape terms is compared to body part terms which have become grammaticalised markers of location in showing that the border between a “what”- and “where”-category is blurred in a similar way as with landscape terms. Morphosyntactic, syntactic and semantic evidence in constructions with body part and landscape terms will reveal what is “what” and what is “where” in Marquesan.¹

1.2. Some preliminaries: categorical distinction between “what” and “where”

Landau and Jackendoff (1993) claim that all languages distinguish between a “what”- and “where”-category. Lyons (1977) distinguishes between so-called ‘first-order entities’ and ‘places/locations’, arguing that there is a categorical difference between the two. According to Lyons the physical world contains discrete, three-dimensional and self-moving entities such as humans and animals as well as entities which are not self-moving, but manipulable as in the case of objects. Lyons calls them first-order entities and views them as ontologically different from locations (1977, p. 693).² Although many researchers assume that there is a basic distinction between first-order entities and places, the nature

¹ For example, prepositional marking, modification and construction types. For a more detailed analysis in the Pacific context, see Cablitz (2005, pp. 163–204, 2006, pp. 309–331).

² Note that Lyons does not include plants in his definition of ‘first-order entities’ although there is no good argument for treating them differently from any other three-dimensional objects.

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