Landscape in Language

Transdisciplinary perspectives

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Culture and Language Use 4

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Landscape in Language

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Volume 4

Landscape in Language. Transdisciplinary perspectives
Edited by David M. Mark, Andrew G. Turk, Niclas Burenhult and David Stea

Foreword

This book substantially advances a nascent interdisciplinary field focused on the human cognition of the natural world we inhabit, as reflected especially though language, but also through other kinds of action. Here, archaeology, geography, psychology, anthropology and linguistics all intersect in mutually informing ways.

This book is not just another "Language and X" book, where X is some other random, perhaps trivial, domain. Perhaps the term 'Landscape' doesn't help here: according to the OED, it came into English at the end of the sixteenth century from Middle Dutch, hitch-hiking on the small easel paintings produced for the newly formed urban bourgeois market in such things. From there, it was rapidly generalized to views and vistas, and then more slowly to the Romantic landscape-appreciation and garden making of the eighteenth century. That sentiment born of a vanishing countryside is not the subject matter here. Instead the focus of this book is on our *Umwelt*, the terrain and water worlds we inhabit and exploit. As yet we have no better widely-accepted term, however, that captures this interdisciplinary domain.

Our relationships with our ecologies are obviously of fundamental importance, and may yet determine the fate of the species on this planet. But on the surface it is quite unclear that concepts of landscape and ecology are systematically reflected in language. Many domains important to human existence have poor lexicalization in the world's languages, and show little or no grammatical reflex (consider e.g. the limited terms for disease or internal organs in many unwritten languages). A moment's reflection though shows that landscape is different. For a start, there are just two great systems of proper nouns in just about all languages: namely personal names, and toponyms. Proper nouns are names, which usually have special grammatical reflexes (as in English where determiners are usually disallowed, as in the oddity of *the London, the Mount Everest*, etc.), even if ultimately what is a proper noun is determined pragmatically by usage. This property of nameability or properhood reveals a deep psychological reality. Persons on the one hand and places on the other are our two great mental index systems – they are the two coordinate systems we use to plot our social and ecological spaces. Naturally, the two systems intersect: we think of places in terms of persons, and persons in terms of places. Both systems are underpinned by specialized neural

circuitry. Both derive their cognitive power from the fact that they name nodes in great networks – a person is joined by kinship or association links to a field of other persons, and a place is connected by pathways to a network of other places. So finding or naming a node in the network releases the computational power afforded by the network – all the inferences about connections, shortest routes, triangulations and so forth.

Toponyms have been the focus of extensive study, especially by those interested in the history they reveal due to their extraordinary stability through time – a stability of course that is derived from their cognitive centrality. Proper nouns, names, are merely a way of picking out specific persons or locations – a shorthand instruction to find a unique particular of a certain class. Normally, then, toponyms ride on a classification of the underlying landforms: Mount Everest is a unique exemplar of the class of mountains, the Thames of the class of rivers, Lake Michigan of the class of lakes, etc. Toponyms thus presuppose cognitive categories, normally expressible in common nouns (although the relation is sometimes more complex).

This book focuses on that underlying cognitive classification, as reflected (perhaps imperfectly) in language. This topic – unlike the study of toponyms in the major Western languages – has been relatively very neglected, and it is only in the years immediately preceding this volume that it has come to the fore as a major focus of interdisciplinary work. This book samples this recent work right across the languages and the varied ecologies of the world, from Maori concepts of landscape in New Zealand to Inuit conceptions of the arctic world. It offers a wonderful panorama of languages, landscape types and methods of analysis, from linguistics to ethnography, geography and GIS to philosophy. It also demonstrates the special added value of interdisciplinary work: none of these studies would have the rich, descriptive 'bite' they have without being deeply informed by parallel work in other disciplines.

One of the signal attractions of this domain is that scientific inquiry is still in the nascent stages. There are still fundamental discoveries to be made, and it will be years before we have achieved a thorough synthesis of all this new material. There are many fundamental open questions about the underlying nature of the cognitive categories involved, how universal they are or how molded by local ecologies or local linguistic structures, and how closely language, cognition, action and use interact in this domain. This book will inspire further research on these issues, while remaining a landmark (forgive the inevitable metaphor) for years to come.

Stephen C. Levinson
Nijmegen, The Netherlands
18 December 2010

Preface

This book is an outcome of an international collaborative effort that began more than eight years ago, and resulted in a transdisciplinary workshop held in New Mexico and Arizona (USA) in October and November 2008.

The idea for the workshop followed from the interaction of two interrelated research projects: a research program on space and landscape, coordinated by Stephen C. Levinson and Niclas Burenhult, in the Language and Cognition Group of the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics (MPI) in Nijmegen, the Netherlands; and the "Ethnophysiography Project" of David Mark (University at Buffalo, USA), Andrew Turk (Murdoch University, Australia), and David Stea (Center for Global Justice, San Miguel de Allende, Mexico).

A place names project at MPI was launched in 2001, and Mark visited MPI during May 2002. Then Mark worked with Turk to launch ethnophysiographic fieldwork in Northwestern Australia in October 2002. Stea joined the Ethnophysiography Project in 2003 to coinitiate a case study on the Navajo language. Turk, who had already visited the Navajo Nation, visited MPI in October 2005 to update researchers there on progress of the ethnophysiography case studies and to discuss enhanced collaboration. The researchers from MPI conducted studies in several languages, leading up to a special issue of *Language Sciences* (Burenhult 2008). Mark and Turk assisted with this publication and visited MPI together in June 2007, at which time the idea of having an international workshop on the topic of landscape in language was discussed and confirmed. In April 2008, the National Science Foundation awarded a grant (BCS-0753737, David Mark, PI) to support the workshop. A call for participants was published internationally, and twenty-eight people were invited to the workshop.

Participants gathered in Albuquerque, New Mexico, on Sunday, October 26, 2008, to launch the workshop. Monday morning started with introductory remarks by the organizers, followed by seven presentations. The next day, participants boarded a chartered bus to travel west to the Navajo Reservation. The group stopped for a while in Window Rock, capital of the Navajo Nation, where participants learned about the activities of the Navajo Nation Cultural Preservation Office and their Geographic Information Systems office. The group then traveled

north to Canyon de Chelly, near Chinle, Arizona, still on the Navajo Reservation, where the remainder of the workshop was held at historic Thunderbird Lodge.

During all of Wednesday and Thursday morning, more presentations were given and the issues they raised were discussed. Thursday afternoon was spent touring the magnificent Canyon de Chelly, visiting ancient cliff dwellings situated on the red sandstone cliffs, and meeting Navajo artists. After Friday morning's final presentations, the afternoon was occupied by three sessions of panel and audience discussions of critical topics: Ethical Issues in Indigenous Landscape Research; Methods and Theory/Methods Interaction; and Priorities for Future Research. On Saturday the group traveled back to Albuquerque, with a long stop in Newcomb, New Mexico, for a lunch and cultural celebration with members of the local Navajo community.

This book presents chapters written by many of the workshop participants. All participants were invited to submit chapters and contributions to the volume were edited by members of the workshop organizing committee. The editors are pleased that the book is being published by John Benjamins as part of their new series, "Culture and Language Use: Studies in Anthropological Linguistics (CLUSAL)," edited by MPI's Gunter Senft, who participated in the workshop.

Many people and organizations contributed to the success of the workshop and the production of this book. The editors wish to thank the U.S. National Science Foundation for awarding grant BCS-0753737 to support the workshop and the preparation of this book. We are also grateful to the Max Planck Society for funding the participation of some MPI staff. Linda Doerfler and Sunita Gupta in the offices of NCGIA-Buffalo assisted with the paperwork and arrangements for the workshop, from the proposal to the final travel reimbursements. Silke Lambert copy-edited all of the chapters, bringing them into compliance with the publisher's format guidelines and detecting a few logical or grammatical inconsistencies; her contribution to the production of the book is greatly appreciated. We especially wish to thank Ron Maldonado, of the Historic Preservation Office, Navajo Nation, who helped arrange our visit to Navajo Nation offices and participated in the workshop, and his colleagues who spoke to our group in Window Rock. We also thank Larry King, who conducted a Navajo blessing of our trip into Canyon de Chelly, and Carmelita Topaha, who organized our visit to Newcomb chapter.

The workshop participants who did not contribute chapters for this book nevertheless played an important role in the discussions and presentations. In alphabetical order, these are: Shonto Begay, Clair Hill, Jay Johnson, Karen Kemp, Larry King, Asifa Majid, Ron Maldonado, Carolyn O'Meara, and Gunter Senft. Several of these people, along with many of the chapter authors, also reviewed other book

chapters. We wish to thank all the workshop participants for the free and open sharing of knowledge and opinions, much of which appears in this book.

David M. Mark, Amherst, New York, USA
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February 2011

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CHAPTER 1

Landscape in language

An introduction

David M. Mark, Andrew G. Turk,
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1. Introduction

The relationships that people have with landscape, individually and collectively, have long formed an important research theme in several disciplines, notably geography, anthropology, philosophy, and psychology. A "man-land tradition," now often re-labeled as a "human-environment tradition," was one of the four traditions of geography identified in Pattison's (1964) classic article on the intellectual core of geography. This tradition and its successors have focused on land use and land-based activities. Anthropologists also examine the relations of people to their environments, mainly emphasizing cultural aspects, and an anthropology of landscape has developed (see especially Ingold 2000). The fundamental relations between culture and landscape, and attachment to landscape, have been discussed in geography (Tuan's 1974 idea of *topophilia*) and in anthropology (for example, Keith Basso's 1996 book *Wisdom Sits in Places*). Philosophers of place have often taken a phenomenological approach to the relationship of people to 'lived-in' landscape (e.g. Casey 1996; Malpas 1999, 2007).

However, until recently, there has been relatively little scholarly research on how landscape is *conceptualized*, that is, how a continuous land surface, a landscape, becomes cognitive entities, and how those entities are classified and represented in language and in thought. Toponyms, the proper names given to geographic features, have certainly been studied, but the relation of the generic parts of such names to geographic categories has received considerably less attention (although see Zelinsky 1955). There has been even less work on cross-cultural and cross-linguistic variations and similarities in delimitation, classification, and naming of geographic features.

The definition of "landscape" itself is not necessarily simple. Granö (1997) suggested that *landscape* consists of the more distant parts of the human environment, and used the term *proximity* for the part of the environment close to the

observer. Granö claimed that landscape is perceived mainly through the visual sense. While intuitively appealing, this definition is not unproblematic. For example, senses other than vision may also be significant: Feld (1996) has drawn attention to the importance of sound in the nature of some places, and similar claims could be made for odor (e.g. the smell of vegetation types, water) and skin sensation (e.g. temperature, wind). Multi-sensory perception of landscape is discussed further in the chapter by Louis in this volume.

Furthermore, the proximity/landscape dichotomy is itself difficult to operationalize, and people may have different ideas as to whether they see landscape and its features as a distant backdrop or a surrounding environment that necessarily contains them (cf. Burenhult & Levinson 2008). There is the possibility that whether a landscape feature or scene is considered to be (as distinguished from "perceived", in the psychological sense) nearby or distant may be related to the relative intimacy of attachment to that feature or scene. As with "environment," there is always the question of the role that is played by the human. Does the person perceive him/herself as necessarily a part of the landscape, or apart from it, as observer, listener, etc.? In other words, is the observer active or passive, and is the landscape "distant" in any relative or absolute sense? On the cognitive level, what is the relation of landscape to spaces too large or complex to be apprehended from a single vantage point? Such spaces are termed "transperceptual spaces" (Downs & Stea 1977) because, to construct the overall concept of the place, a series of direct perceptual experiences would need to be integrated over time.

Despite the apparent lack of clarity in the "proximal/distal" distinction regarding landscape, this distinction has been accepted in the psychology of perception for more than a century. For instance, it is implicit in Gibson's later work (Gibson 1979, 1987; Gibson & Bridgeman 1987; Reed & Jones 1982), in his use of "contours" and "textural gradients," for example.

However, a definition relying on common understanding of the proximal/distal distinction may be difficult to reconcile with notions of emotional and cultural attachment to landscapes, landscape features, and places (Basso 1996; Tuan 1974). For example, Ingold's (2000) approach to anthropology of landscape involves concepts such as dwelling and livelihood, and does not recognize a distinction between natural and human-modified landscapes.

There is debate in the literature concerning the sources and meanings of the English term *landscape* and its historical and conceptual links to similar terms in associated languages, such as the German *Landschaft* (Cosgrove 2004; Ingold 2010; Olwig 2008). Ingold (2010) discusses the visual bias in most accounts of landscape and suggests that: "... we might do well to return to an earlier understanding of landscape – one that is closer to the ground, more haptic than optical" (p. 17). Cosgrove (2004) notes that: "Spatially, landscape was constructed as a

bounded and measured area, an absolute space, represented through the scientific techniques of measured distance, geometrical survey, and linear perspective" (p. 62). He goes on to make the case for definitions of *landscape* and *Landschaft* which are not so bound to measurement orthodoxy but incorporate a sense of social construction:

> Much recent scholarship has sought to unmask and denaturalize landscape, paying as much attention to its pictorial and literary representations as to material spaces themselves. In refusing to take landscape "at face value," such landscape study moves beyond Landschaft in its original Germanic sense, beyond the pictorial English sense of landscape as an aesthetically unified space, and beyond the traditional geographical sense of landscape as an expression of ecological relations between land and life. It draws upon and contributes to the revised ways of conceptualizing space with which I opened this discussion, regarding space as a function of natural and social processes, but also as an outcome that in turn has social agency, able to create and transform the material world. Landscape's revival within contemporary geography derives from those aspects embedded in its conceptual history that allow it to transcend the modernist dualism (perhaps dialectic) of nature and culture. (p. 68)

This sentiment is echoed by Smith (1989: 109): "With a dialectical conception of geography more rooted today, and the mutual interdependence of social theory and geography increasingly evident, the time has proven ripe for a more serious and long-overdue reexamination of landscape that moves beyond narrow descriptive, aesthetic, and idealistic confines." The Landscape in Language Workshop, and this book, open up new perspectives on this discussion of the relationship between physical attributes of land and the meanings attributed to it by those who dwell in that place.

To explain all of these issues would involve a lengthy analysis of relevant aspects of cultural geography, phenomenology, semiotics, linguistics, human ecology, environmental psychology, etc., impractical to cover adequately in this chapter. However, some discussion of these issues is included below and in other chapters of this volume.

2. The linguistics of landscape

The language sciences have no tradition of research on landscape. The only branch of linguistics with a vested interest in landscape is onomastics (the study of names), but typically the study of place names (toponymy) has been approached in a way totally divorced from the actual referential subject matter.

In fact, landscape has several characteristics that give it potential to exert considerable influence on theorization of key problems throughout linguistics. How do languages select geographic entities as objects to be labeled ('mountain,' 'river,' 'valley')? Are there universal categories? What is the formal and referential relationship between common nouns (landscape terms) and proper nouns (toponyms or place names)? Are terms for landforms easily translatable across languages (*mountain–montagne–Berg*)? What are the ontological principles behind such terms? Do they involve structured sets of lexicon, semantic fields and relations, with possible repercussions in grammar? How much variation exists in categorial strategies across languages and speakers? What are the factors that drive such variation? Does variation in linguistic representation have resonance in cognition? Questions such as these indicate that linguistics as a discipline may have a lot to gain from in-depth exploration of the landscape domain.

Language and linguistics also have great potential to be of help in studying various aspects of human-landscape relationships (Levinson 2003; Levinson & Wilkins 2006; Majid et al. 2004). Language reflects a range of cultural and cognitive preoccupations, and linguistics has tools and models for identifying, describing and explaining representations of landscape of key concern to other branches of science. Thus, landscape opens up important links between linguistics and disciplines with a longer tradition of interest in the domain that usually do not have a major focus on language, such as anthropology, archaeology, environmental psychology, philosophy, and cognitive geography (e.g. Bell et al. 1996; Bender 1993; Hirsch & O'Hanlon 1995; Tilley 1994; Mark et al. 1999; Smith & Mark 2001). Here, linguistic attention to the domain is certain to unleash a variety of new questions and perspectives of inquiry.

An indication of the potential of linguistic exploration of landscape was provided by a recent pilot study at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, initiated by its director Stephen C. Levinson in 2004 and coordinated by Niclas Burenhult. The study – whose results were published as a special issue of the journal *Language Sciences* (Burenhult 2008a) – was a cross-cultural inquiry into linguistic categorization of the landscape domain. Case studies of language-specific systems were carried out with uniform methods by language experts across a sample of nine geographically and genealogically diverse languages. The following were the general research questions pursued by the study:

1. How is landscape divided into categories, and how are these categories named? Are there cross-linguistic differences in how landscape is divided into categories? Which are the main determinants of landscape categorization?