

16.1 Introduction¹

16.1.1 Motivations

p. 369 Documentation of a language includes investigation of the semantics of terms in the language. The landscape constitutes an important domain of human experience, which is sometimes inadequately covered in language documentation activities. By landscape, we mean the larger components of the human environment, composed of very large features and places that often can be best perceived and appreciated from a substantial distance (Granö 1997)—features such as mountains, rivers, valleys, and forests. Voegelin and Voegelin (1957) recognized topography as a fundamental domain for language documentation. We also include large water and vegetation features in our idea of the landscape domain.

While such a physiographic definition of landscape is useful as an initial approach to partitioning off a domain of interest, this definition is not unproblematic. It could be seen to not include emotional and cultural attachment to landscapes, landscape features, and places. To incorporate these considerations into the initial definition would involve a lengthy analysis of relevant issues of cultural geography, phenomenology, semiotics, etc., unfeasible in this context; however, the reader should assume that cultural aspects are included, as discussed further below.

For domains such as zoology and botany, scientific taxonomies can provide a clear etic² grid against which indigenous methods of categorization can be recorded. Likewise, the Munsell colour chart (Landa and Fairchild 2005; Munsell 1905) provides an etic grid for recording the semantics of colour terms. For the geographic or landscape domain, however, there is no such grid. One of the reasons that the landscape domain does not have an etic grid is the ontology of landscape—much of the variation of the Earth's surface is more or less continuous, and thus the same region of land can be subdivided into nameable landforms and other landscape features in many ways. Also, geographic objects (mountains, hills, rivers, lakes, etc.) tend to have fuzzy or graded boundaries, and there seems to be considerable variability in what gets delimited and how the objects are categorized and named. Another complication is that geographic objects are almost always very large and in fixed locations, hence it is difficult to elicit terms by showing real examples directly. These characteristics of the landscape domain provide the researcher with a number of methodological challenges regarding the elicitation of landscape terms.

There is some logic in collecting toponyms (place names) during the same field procedures used for investigating generic landscape terms, since the relationship between these two ways of referring to landscape features is an important aspect of understanding conceptualizations of place (see Nash and Simpson, Chapter 17 below). However, there are sometimes complications which make such combined objectives difficult to achieve. For instance, generic landscape terms may be considered as not culturally sensitive, whereas access to placename data might be restricted because of disputes over land tenure rights, or for other reasons.

p. 370 16.1.2 The landscape domain

Since the landscape domain is a key aspect of place, and vice versa, it is an important component of culture and language for all people, especially for those indigenous peoples who have an unbroken intimate association with a particular area of 'country' that has lasted hundreds, perhaps thousands, of generations. However, as mentioned above, the nature of landscape means that there is great potential for different types of classification systems to arise within different languages, even in very similar environments. Hence it is not possible to provide a generic template for investigation of landscape terms.