

## 17.1 Introduction

Placenames are the most direct link between a language and its territory, current or ancestral. For many speech communities, placenames are an important part of their cultural heritage, encapsulating rights to land and recalling events, activities, and knowledge. Coming to grips with the placenames of a speech community involves understanding its landownership system, and the ways in which the people interact with the land (i.e. the practical uses they make of it as well as the ways of talking and thinking about land). Knowing something of the history and prehistory of the area is also important, as placenames may be taken over from earlier inhabitants who spoke a different language; even if the earlier inhabitants spoke an earlier form of the modern language, the relevant vocabulary and morphological structures may have changed since the initial bestowal. This is easy to see in the case of languages with written records, such as English (Cameron 1996), and can sometimes be conjectured in the case of speech communities without written records.

p. 393 This chapter is directed at the situation of a language as spoken away from an urban area, in rural or more remote landscapes which the speakers have occupied for some generations. Working with speakers of such languages to document the placenames of an area requires working with as many speakers as feasible, since, as Hunn (1996) points out, speakers may vary considerably in the extent of the area they know, and the number of the placenames pertaining to that area. Thus placename documentation implicates variable collective knowledge to a greater extent than general lexical documentation. In many speech communities, placenames may be linked to landownership, and so can be sensitive topics; for example when there are disputes over the extent of an area designated by a placename. Sometimes placenames (as with proper names generally) may be treated as intellectual property, and there may be restrictions on dissemination of information about the place or the placename (Bradley and Kearney 2009).

Toponymy is the study of placenames and their systematic properties within a geographic area or speech community. The need to understand toponymy arises in interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary fieldwork, most obviously in basic location references, whether in biological and physical sciences, or as resonant landmarks in biography and narrative. See also the chapters in this volume on astronomy (Holbrook, Chapter 15), and geography (Turk et al., Chapter 16). Placename documentation relates also to general site recording, cartography, and GIS (Geographic Information Systems: software for storing, managing, and displaying data about places linked to coordinate systems). These related fields are beyond the scope of this chapter.

## 17.2 Linguistic Aspects

Recording the linguistic properties of the name(s) of a place focuses on treating each placename just as any other lexical item in the language. To recognize the placename as a lexeme means first distinguishing it from a description—what makes for example *Bald Mountain* a placename rather than a description of a particular bare mountain. This is not always easy; placenames may have ‘descriptive force’ (Hunn 1996), in that the name calls to mind some property of the site, or something associated with it. Indeed, descriptions and placenames may merge (Wilkinson, Marika, and Williams 2009), especially for communities in which placenames are created readily for minor places, as Widlok argues is the case for the #Akhoe Hai//om people of northern Namibia (Widlok 2008).

p. 394 Having ascertained that an expression is a placename, we need to describe its denotation, the sense of the name (literal meaning), how the sense relates to the denotation, its etymology if it is not transparent, including any folk etymologies, and its connotations. We also need to find out the grammatical properties of the placename, both the internal morphological properties and the combinatory properties.