

Charing: the hamlet and the cross no longer exist, but the place where they were is a reference point in London.

17.2.3 Sense, etymology, and etiology

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A placename may be transparent; its sense may consist, for example, of a landform type *El Paso* (The Pass), or of a modifier plus landform or built structure type *Red River*, *Rio Grande*. If such a placename becomes associated with a nearby habitation, then the sense and the denotation diverge, and with time the relation becomes ↲ less clear. So *El Paso* is better known as the name of a city. However, it is quite normal in some speech communities for a placename to have no synchronic analysis, whether because the name has been taken over from another language or because the sense has been lost through the generations.

Determining whether a placename is semantically transparent is not easy, since people and communities may well develop folk etymologies for the names of places. It is also difficult if there are concerns about landownership; speakers of language X may be reluctant to admit that a placename in their country is analyzable in language Y if speakers of language Y formerly inhabited that country. Without knowing the circumstances of the bestowal of the name, we can rarely be certain that we have accurately determined the etymological sense of the placename. This is not to discount the importance of recording folk etymologies—the folk etymology of a landform may actually link it into placename subsystems that have emerged since the initial bestowal. Folk etymologies are useful for understanding how speakers fit the place and the placename into their understandings of the land and its ownership. Ideally, the etymology of a placename is discovered by finding out who bestowed the name, and the circumstances of the bestowal. This is usually impossible for speech communities that do not have written records extending back before oral traditions—indeed, there may be traditions of how all places have been named by ancestral beings (Tamisari 2002). These sometimes competing accounts constitute the etiology of the name.

Once a large body of placenames has been collected, it may be possible to find patterns of placenaming which in turn may help in elucidating the senses of the placenames and the semantic systems of the speech community (Hunn 1996). For example, some speech communities use landform and built structure types as parts of placenames, creating binomial structures or possessive structures, as English speakers do. Others rarely use them. Some communities create placenames from short sentences describing events that happened at the place or that describe characteristic activities at the site. Some communities build the names of people into placenames, whether reflecting some kind of ownership or association or commemoratively, as in the many places in colonized countries named after grantees of the colonizing countries.

Even if a landform or structure is used as part of the sense of the name, the modifier may require exposition. It may be a commemorative modifier (the name *Flinders Island* consists of a landform type and a modifier commemorating the explorer Matthew Flinders), or a metaphor, which describes the landform or something which is associated with the landform (*Pelican Lagoon*), or a modifier which sets a landform as part of a subsystem (*First Creek*, *Second Creek*).

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17.2.4 Social position of the place

Which places get named will be affected by sociocultural practices. Some places may have religious significance. The landownership and governance system of a group will also result in the creation of areas which then are assigned names. The area serviced by a particular church may get a parish name; areas ruled by particular types of people or institutions may be named (County Antrim, Ulster Province, and so on).