Documenting the Landscape (Geographic) Domain in Anthropological Linguistic Fieldwork

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Introduction

- How do landscape objects get categorized in language?
- How does a ‘continuous’ landscape get seen as ‘objects’ at all?
- How does a researcher discover and then accurately document landscape categories?
• Is this an instance of a marnda in Yindjibarndi?
• If so, what are its limits? Is ‘the feature’ just the rock outcrop or does it include the surrounding incline?
• How would Seri speakers categorize it?
• In ethnobotanical research scientific taxonomies can be used as “etic grids” against which indigenous systems of categorization can be recorded
  – Likewise, the Munsell color chart provides an “etic grid” for color terms
  – Is there a scientific taxonomy for the landscape domain that can serve as an “etic grid”?
Here we will address some of the issues related to the elicitation of landscape terms:
- Scale of landscape
- Ambiguity of reference
- Interpreting indigenous categories
To illustrate some of the methodological challenges of landscape elicitation, data from the following languages will be presented:

- Seri, language isolate, spoken in northwestern Mexico
- Yindjibarndi, Pama-Nyungan, spoken in Pilbara region, Western Australia
• Many landscape objects can only be perceived or recognized at certain scales.
  – For instance, how did people find out that Baja California is a peninsula and not an island?

Picture from: http://encarta.msn.com/map_701510442/baja_california.html
• Some landscape objects are only recognizable up close

zaaj ‘cave’ in Seri, along the side of a dry riverbed (or arroyo)
Scale of landscape – cont’d

• Some landscape objects are only recognizable up close

Parts of the beach which have different names in Seri
Scale of landscape – cont’d

- Seri parts of the beach (with labels)
Scale of landscape – cont’d

• Possible solutions
  – Keep in mind that scale is an important and tricky component to discovering landscape categories
  – Explore the landscape on foot with native speaker consultants as much as possible
  – Viewing the landscape from different vantage points
Ambiguity of reference
Ambiguity of reference – cont’d

• All 4 groups of Yindjibarndi elders who reacted to this photo included *mankurdu* in their response

• So what does *mankurdu* refer to?
  – ‘river’, ‘flood’, ‘strong, fast flowing water’, ‘muddy brown water’, ‘river bordered by trees’, ‘riverbed’, or the name of the place where the picture was taken
The published dictionaries (Wordick 1982, Anderson 1986), indicate that *mankurdu* means ‘Fortescue River’

But fieldwork by Mark, Turk and Stea has shown that *mankurdu* refers to water flow that is deep and fast, and has a meaning close to that of the English word ‘flood’
• Using photographs, drawings or pointing gestures can lead to ambiguity of what is being referred to.
• Photographs can be a good tool for testing extensional boundaries of terms, but they can cause some undesired effects, as well.
In-situ elicitation in the riverbed of El Rio San Ignacio, Sonora, Mexico
Ambiguity of reference – cont’d

• Possible solutions
  – In-situ elicitation
  – Finding multiple instances of a given referent to a landscape term
  – Lexical relation elicitation with landscape terms
  – Participation in landscape-related activities
    • e.g., hunting and gathering
Interpreting indigenous categories

arroyo in Seri – *hant ipzx*

reef in Seri – *xatj*
Interpreting indigenous categories – cont’d

• What is the denotation of *xatj* in Seri?
  – Does it mean ‘(sea) reef’ or something more general?
Interpreting indigenous categories – cont’d

• *xatj* in Seri appears to have a broader extension than ‘reef’ in English
  – See also *itoaa xatj* ‘its foot’ (lit. ‘its reef leg’)

• Does this term refer to the spatial property of an object?
  – A long (semi-)raised object?

• Is the original use of *xatj* to refer to sea reefs?
Interpreting indigenous categories – cont’d

• Possible solutions
  – Explore the landscape that exists in the field site where you are working – see what’s out there!
  – Participate in landscape-related activities
  – In-situ landscape diagramming
  – Work backwards from placenames to landscape generics
  – Record landscape narratives
  – Review previously recorded narratives, songs, etc.
There are quite a few variables to keep track of when conducting landscape elicitation:

- Viewing the landscape at an appropriate scale
- Preventing ambiguity of reference
- Discovering indigenous categories
Summary – cont’d

- Collection of landscape terms requires the researcher to
  - Conduct fieldwork – learning aspects of the language and culture, as well as experiencing parts of daily life that involve the landscape
  - Not “lead the witness”
  - Be open to new interpretations
• Researchers can contribute to the documentation of landscape terms by
  – geo-tagging photographs or videos
  – linking photos or video with related recordings and transcriptions, including landscape terms and/or placenames
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Appendix

• Additional photos of marnda
Appendix – cont’d

• Another picture of the marnda, with David Mark for scale
Appendix – cont’d

- Additional photos of Ashburton River