

# 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?



## Introduction – cont'd



- 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?

## Introduction – cont'd

- 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”?

## Introduction – cont'd

- Here we will address some of the issues related to the elicitation of landscape terms
  - Scale of landscape
  - Ambiguity of reference
  - Interpreting indigenous categories

## Introduction – cont'd

- 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

# Scale of landscape

- 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](http://encarta.msn.com/map_701510442/baja_california.html)



## Scale of landscape – cont'd

- 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

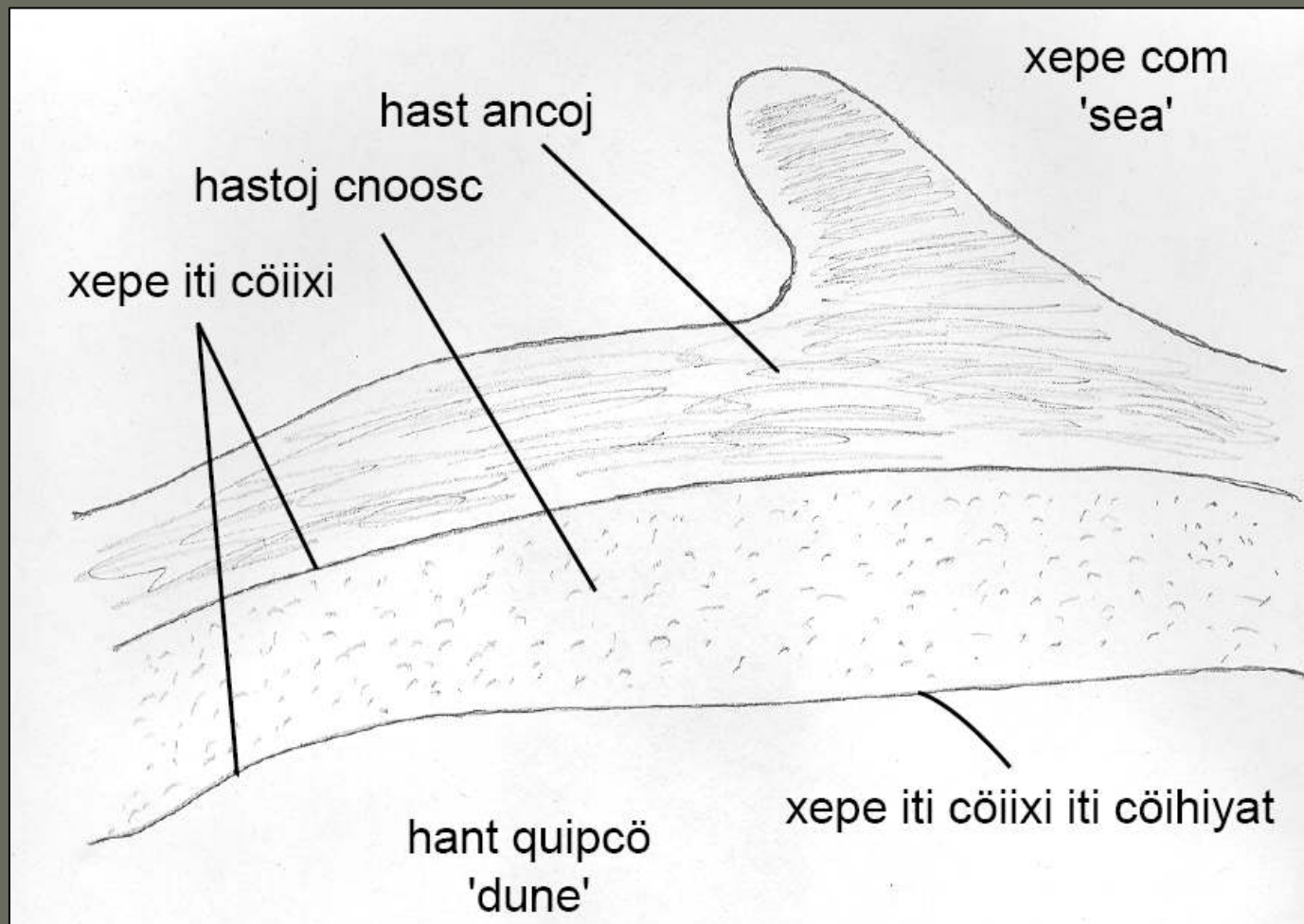
- Some landscape objects are only recognizable up close

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



## Ambiguity of reference – cont'd

- 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'



## Ambiguity of reference – cont'd

- 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.

# Ambiguity of reference – cont'd



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.

# Summary

- 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

## Summary – cont'd

- 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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**Microsoft**



# 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

