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## What's in a Name? How Toponyms Connect Language and Society through Place

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**What's in a Name?**  
**How Toponyms Connect Language  
and Society through Place**

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in Linguistic Studies with Honors

May, 2008

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## Abstract

This is a study of place, meaning, society, and language, all of which interact through names. Although names are an essential part of human language, they remain on the periphery of linguistic studies. This study situates names in linguistics through an analysis of the meaning in a toponym, or place name.

According to lexical theory *words* are arbitrary. Yet we bestow *names* based on how they sound or what they have already come to represent; names are not arbitrary. Furthermore, a name becomes opaque when we can no longer see through its form to understand its meaning. Then it picks up new meanings based on the community it presently references. This paper builds on these two main theoretical differences between words and names.

Scholars have studied toponyms from the angles of many different academic disciplines. Philosophical literature asks to what a name actually refers. Anthropological literature questions how toponyms function as integral parts of specific cultures. Political literature looks at how governments have changed toponyms to further their own political aims: to build community or break down enemies. Through this inquiry into toponymic literature, we see that scholars address toponyms through a variety of disciplines with a common link: a name's significance is connected to a society.

I support this discussion with an example of a specific toponym that exemplifies many of the themes that surface in the toponymic literature. Far from an arbitrary pairing of form and meaning, at the outset "New Orleans" denoted an image of European grandeur that the founders wanted to connect with their city. Over time the name took on a myriad of other meanings relating to the people and the culture of the place: Mardi Gras, jazz, Cajun culture, and the Mississippi River. In the wake of hurricane Katrina the meaning of "New Orleans" changed yet again. "New Orleans" demonstrates concretely that far from being arbitrary, names reflect the experience of the people who use them.

I argue that because the significance of names is in the society that uses them, linguistics can incorporate names through the sub-discipline of *sociolinguistics*, how language functions in society. Although linguistics has historically avoided the study of names because they add nothing to the general of structural linguistics, names have meaning in relation to society that other words lack. While this meaning does not contribute to an understanding of the structure of language, it does contribute to an understanding of language, so there needs to be a place in linguistics for names. Names are language and society amalgamated. Their meaning comes from how they connect these two areas. Names therefore constitute a rarely studied type of sociolinguistics, where we see how society gives words meaning beyond their function as referents, and where language gives society an image of itself.

This study looks at an aspect of language that has been sidelined by linguistics, and through the use of other disciplines, finds a way to study it as language.

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## I. Introduction

What if I had the power to change the name of your hometown? What if I decided that your town should be named after me instead? I doubt you would be pleased. If I decided, however, that the word *cat* [kæt] should be replaced by a different sequence of sounds, *tig* [tɪg] for example, I doubt you would think twice about it. I admit that from a practicality standpoint, it would not be simple to change a random word like *cat*; it would actually be pointless and stupid. But since words are just arbitrary combinations of sounds, the fact is, *cat* could be changed and nobody would feel that they were being wronged in the process. We care about words differently than we care about names.

Although names lack the arbitrariness of words, they too are part of the human communication system. Yet names, specifically toponyms, or place names, are rarely studied as linguistics, the discipline that studies the puzzle of human language. And so the following is my inquiry into the meaning of toponyms: if we care about them differently than we care about words, then what is a name and how does it fit into language? Through a discussion of lexical theory, toponymic literature, and a case study of the meanings lodged in a particular toponym, I am equipped to situate names in linguistics as *sociolinguistics*, the discipline that combines language and society. This is a study of place, meaning, society, and language, all of which interact through names.

## II. Lexical Theory

### a) Words vs Names

A name is a word, but a name also differs from a word. This dichotomy has pushed names to the periphery of linguistic studies. In order to situate them in the discipline and fully understand their significance, I will draw on certain lexical theories in linguistics. Although names complicate lexical studies, these theories are the background that will ultimately enable me to argue that names are sociolinguistic.

The dichotomy between names and words has to do with the specific linguistic understanding of the term “arbitrary.” According to the introductory linguistics textbook, *An Introduction to Language*, by Victoria Fromkin, Robert Rodman and Nina Hyams, “arbitrary describes the property of language...whereby there is no natural or intrinsic relationship between the way the word is pronounced and its meaning.”<sup>1</sup> Adrian Akmanjian, Richard Demers, Ann Farmer, and Robert Harnish concur: see this in their *Linguistics: An Introduction to Language and Communication*, where they write “a word is an arbitrary pairing of sound and meaning.”<sup>2</sup>

There is no reason why the specific combination of sounds [kæt] should mean that little furry creature we keep as a pet. That is the essence of linguistic arbitrariness: because that creature could be referred to by *any* combination of sounds, it just so happens that the particular sounds [kæt] are

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<sup>1</sup> Victoria Fromkin, Robert Rodman and Nina Hyams. *An Introduction to Language*. (Boston: Thomson Heinle, 2003), 575.

<sup>2</sup> Adrian Akmanjian, Richard A. Demers, Ann K. Farmer, and Robert M. Harnish. *Linguistics: An Introduction of Linguistic Study*. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001), 16.

arbitrarily assigned to it. The sound has no intrinsic link to the creature. This definition disregards onomatopoeic words, words such as “cock-a-doodle-doo” or “boom” that imitate sounds, since these words only constitute a small percentage of the words in any given language (and I will return to these exceptions shortly).

Although according to the traditional linguistic definition of a word its form and meaning are paired arbitrarily, a word still has meaning. The sounds that comprise any given word are the form of the word, and the word’s referent is its meaning. Once the form is paired with a real word referent, the form gains a meaning connected to something genuine. Therefore a word itself has meaning once it is paired with a referent. What is arbitrary, however, is the particular pairing of sound combinations and referents.

#### b) A Side Glance at Onomatopoeia

The exceptions such as onomatopoeia, words in which form imitates meaning, can be explained through sound symbolism, a peripheral branch of linguistics, specifically phonology, which assumes that sounds have intrinsic meanings. In the introduction to their book, *Sound Symbolism*, Leanne Hinton, Johanna Nichols, and John Ohala define sound symbolism as “the direct linkage between sound and meaning.”<sup>3</sup> They admit, however, that while sound symbolism might explain a relationship that linguistics has always deemed arbitrary, it has much to prove before most linguists change their

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<sup>3</sup> Leanne Hinton, Johanna Nichols and John Ohala. *Sound Symbolism*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 1.

definition of a word. While I incorporate and reference sound symbolism because it is a linguistic theory in which names are involved, I note that it is not the mainstream linguistic view and do not base any of my claims about names upon it. Thus I continue to maintain that words are arbitrary, but that names complicate this definition.

According to Hinton, Nichols, and Ohala, there are four categories of sound symbolism, ranging from those in which sound and meaning are directly linked, to conventional arbitrary words. **Corporeal sound symbolism** includes words that express the emotional or physical state of the speaker. This includes involuntary sounds such as hiccupping, if considered a word, and interjections. These utterances are difficult to standardize or put into writing, and remain on the fringes of sound symbolism, as they stretch our concept of the word. **Imitative sound symbolism** consists of onomatopoeic words and words representing environmental sounds such as “bang” and “swish.” Since these words become standardized in each language, it is onomatopoeic words that come to mind when we think of examples that defy most words’ arbitrary form-meaning relationship. In **Synesthetic sound symbolism** certain vowels or consonants consistently represent certain tangible properties of objects. For example, most languages use a high front vowel as a diminutive or to represent small objects. While these similarities seem more common than they would be if form and meaning were arbitrarily linked, scholars cannot yet prove, due to many exceptions in the data, whether sounds are *intrinsically* linked to concepts. Finally in **conventional, or**

**phonesthetic, sound symbolism** certain phonemes and clusters of phonemes have certain meanings. For example, the “gl” of glitter, gleam, glow, etc connotes indirect light. These symbolisms, however, are largely language specific, and thus may be arbitrary in and of themselves.<sup>4</sup> Through the four types of sound symbolism, some linguists attempt to prove that words have specific forms because the sounds that constitute the form are inherently linked to the word’s meaning.

According to sound symbolist Margaret Magnus, words have particular forms because of the meanings we understand from certain sounds. She claims that we use particular words for sound both because of their True Iconism (that the /p/ in stomp, step, and tramp for example, connotes the stepping motion) and because of Clustering (that once we have glitter and gleam, we will continue to use the /gl/ for new words involving indirect light such as glow and glisten).<sup>5</sup> Hinton, Nichols, and Ohala note, however, that the English understanding of “gl,” could also exemplify a human tendency to create links between form and meaning that do not exist. Both the inclination to create new words with sound clustering, and the tendency to link form and meaning, are actually issues of naming.

Sound symbolists study these ideas in the context of naming, specifically the formation of brand names, which companies consciously create to evoke specific connotations. In her article “Strawberry is no Blackberry: Building Brands Using Sound,” Sharon Begley sites the examples

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<sup>4</sup> Hinton, Nichols, and Ohala. *Sound Symbolism*, 2-5.

<sup>5</sup> Magnus. “Magical Letter Page.” 1998. <http://www.trismegistos.com/MagicalLetterPage/>

“Prozac” and “Amazon,” in which companies use the fricative /z/ to connote speed.<sup>6</sup> Similarly the shampoo “L’Oréal,” uses flowing sounds to symbolize waving, flouncing hair.<sup>7</sup> Hinton, Nichols, and Ohala emphasize that, more than using the intrinsic meanings of the sounds themselves, we create product names because they sound like other words that already have certain meanings. For example, “L’Oréal” sounds like the feminine name “Laura” and the flower “Laurel.”<sup>8</sup> Thus while naming may be a function of the intrinsic meanings of certain sounds (evidence for sound symbolism), sound symbolists also understand it as a result of the societal associations of certain sound combinations.

#### c) Names: Opacity and Transparency

Names are different from words because we choose them specifically based on the relationship between form and society. When the referent is unique such as myself (Lisa Rebecca Radding) or Jerusalem, thereby requiring a name, socio-cultural and political factors complicate the arbitrary (or purely sound-based) relationship between form and referent. Since names cannot be separated from these factors, they remain under-studied in a discipline most concerned with the structure of utterances rather than its connection to people. Yet because these societal factors complicate any lexical definition of a word, names should be analyzed as sociolinguistics,

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<sup>6</sup> Sharon Begly. “Strawberry is no Blackberry: Building Brands Using Sound.” *Wall Street Journal*. August 26, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Hinton, Nichols, and Ohala. *Sound Symbolism*,6

<sup>8</sup> Hinton, Nichols, and Ohala. *Sound Symbolism*,6

which is the study of language as it functions in society, commonly understood as the interaction between linguistic and social variables. This understanding gives names a genuine niche in linguistics. I will return to this argument in the final section of the paper.

In addition to the lexical definition of a word, I will draw on less structurally based lexical theory such as Opacity Theory. Opacity is “a failure to analyze a form according to its historical, morphosemantic composition,” by which I mean it is a reanalysis of a word that is more grammatical and less content based.<sup>9</sup> Take the example term “pitch black.” The phrase comes from the metaphor “as black as pitch.” Over time, however, people failed to remember the metaphor and understood “pitch” instead as a color intensifier similar to “very.” This explains why as my roommate and I stepped out of my car on a winter day, she described the snowy scenery as “pitch white” meaning “very white.” The term “pitch” has, in effect, been grammaticalized, or become opaque.<sup>10</sup> Although this process occurs with many types of words, it is particularly pertinent to names because rather than bestowed arbitrarily, names are frequently given to impart a certain meaning. Such is the case with Le Havre, a city in Northwestern France. The city was named “Le Havre,” meaning “the harbor,” because of the importance of just its harbor developed by the king. Today, however, the mention of the city by name may communicate maritime connotations, but does not necessarily conjure images of a harbor. Instead “Le Havre” has simply come to mean the essence of that

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<sup>9</sup> Brian D. Joseph and Richard D. Janda. *The Handbook of Historical Linguistics*. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 659.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph and Janda. *The Handbook of Historical Linguistics*, 659.

particular city. In this case, the name is now opaque. Thus names have an original meaning that gets lost over time until the name feels like a word- like an arbitrary combination of sounds used to reference a certain item or idea.

The converse of opacity is transparency: when a word is not at all arbitrary, but we can “see through” it, thereby understanding why it has the form it does. This phenomenon tends to happen with names right at the time they are given. For example, when “Le Havre” was founded, the name was transparent so that any mention of the city evoked thoughts of the port at the same site.

Once a name becomes opaque, however, we frequently reassign meaning to it with a folk etymology because we generally want to link form and meaning, especially in terms such as names that we care about. “In folk etymology, a lexical item (which may be historically complex, but which has become opaque to speakers) is reanalyzed and given a morphological structure that it did not have before and that appears to be at least partially transparent.”<sup>11</sup> We can understand this phenomenon through the example of the word “hangnail.” We derive “hangnail” from the Old English form “agnail” meaning torn skin on the toenail or fingernail. Yet today we would assume that the term “hangnail” is because it involves a piece of nail hanging off the finger. A toponymic example is Buffalo, NY, which is commonly thought to be named after the animal that roamed the wide open plains of the United States. The city's name is actually a perversion of the French

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<sup>11</sup> Laurel J. Brinton and Elizabeth Closs Traugott. *Lexicalization and Language Change*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 83.

*Beau Fleuve* (a fine river) referring to the Niagara. These derivations are folk etymologies; they have nothing to do with where the terms originated. Rather they are associations that we create to take the arbitrariness out of the term. This degrammaticalization gives more concrete meaning to an abstract form (which is in contrast to the grammaticalization that makes a word opaque or abstract). People have the tendency to connect form to meaning, and since names are usually bestowed as such for some reason, we create folk etymologies (similarly to studying sound symbolism) to combat any arbitrariness in a name.

We generally bestow names because they have a specific meaning that we want to associate with the referent. The form is not arbitrary; the name is transparent through societal associations. Yet over time, as the place (when using place names) becomes more familiar, the name becomes more opaque. Eventually we fail to see the underlying meaning of the name's form and we give it a new meaning. So over time, names grammaticalize and subsequently degrammaticalize because we want to keep them away from the arbitrariness of words. Toponyms, however, pick up new meanings beyond folk etymologies, based instead on the community the name comes to represent. Because of the meanings associated with names, through their origins or the associations that arise once they become opaque, they complicate lexical theory and must be understood as language in the context of society in order to fit into linguistics. This background in lexical theory will support the following discussion of the types of meanings in any given name.

### III. A Review of Toponymic Literature

Scholars can study toponyms linguistically as words themselves or geographically in conjunction with the places those words reference. Whether a scholar chooses a more word-oriented or place-oriented approach to his or her study, however, the ultimate questions in toponymic literature are not about the words and places themselves, but about the impact of toponyms on humans and human society. Therefore, rather than dividing the literature on toponymy into linguistic versus geographic studies, especially since studies in strictly linguistic or geographical analysis are few in number, I sort the literature by the angle through which various authors find significance in toponyms. Apart from the factual background literature that does not search for toponymic significance, most literature on toponymy addresses the subject from one of three angles: philosophic, anthropologic, or political, with some overlap mainly between the last two categories. In whichever genre, each scholar analyzes the meanings of toponyms to determine their contribution to the human world. Because their human significance makes toponyms interesting in and of themselves, toponymy is an interdisciplinary field that forces an expanded understanding of sociolinguistics: names plus society.

Disregarding for a moment literature written from an angle where the study of toponyms raises thought-provoking questions about the human world, I start with the literature that provides a factual overview of toponymy. The basic literature on toponymy defines names in ordinary terms. *Place Names*

by Richard Randall is divided into chapters that explain the most general questions about names and places. For example: What is a place name? What kinds of places are named? It then discusses maps, types of names, places names that have changed, terminology and orthography for place names, etc. Rather than proving a point or analyzing a question around naming, this book gives the reader a broad overview of toponyms. George Stewart's *Names of the Globe* gives the reader a similar background. It covers fewer topics than Randall's book but is organized more systematically taking the reader from the place and the name to types of names to geographical and historical instances of naming. While these books do not raise interesting questions on their own that carry throughout the course of the book or delve into the significance of a toponym, they both explain thoroughly all the terminology and background concepts needed to study toponyms.

Toponymic literature easily finds cross-disciplinary significance because a name is different than an ordinary word. In *The Study of Names*, which is another general study of names (with a chapter on toponyms), through a more theoretical than factual approach, Frank Nuessel writes that the primary function of a name is reference.<sup>12</sup> The simplest linguistic definition of a word, however, is also based on reference. In *An Introduction to Language* Victoria Fromkin, Robert Rodman and Nina Hyams write that, "words... (are) sound units that are related to specific meanings."<sup>13</sup> They go on to say that the relationship between speech sounds (form) and concept

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<sup>12</sup> Frank Nuessel, *The Study of Names*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992), 3

<sup>13</sup> Victoria Fromkin, Robert Rodman, Nina Hyams, *An Introduction to Language* (United States: Heinle, 2003), 5

(meaning) is mainly arbitrary; it is assigned for no reason other than reference. (These linguists adhere to the traditional linguistic definition of a word, which I accept in this paper.) Whereas a word is a combination of sounds assigned arbitrarily to reference something in the real world, a name isn't necessarily as random. As Randall and Stewart explain in their basic introductions to place names, we typically name places after people or events. We use sound combinations, or words, that already exist, and we attach them to a place for a reason. Because names lack the inherent arbitrary quality of words, there exists literature on place names asking questions about their meaning. This literature finds meaning by approaching toponymy from various disciplinary angles such as philosophic, anthropologic, or political.

As a component of human language, names, like words, should lend themselves to purely linguistic studies, such as those structural disciplines that predict the grammars of human language. Studies of this variety, however, are minimal in toponymic literature because linguistics has not offered a way to analyze names separately from the more arbitrary words, and it is this distinction that lets us connect names to human society, rendering them interesting in and of themselves. Of the literature I found, only Willy Van Langendonck, in his book *Trends in Linguistics: Theory and Typology of Proper Names* studies toponyms from a purely linguistic angle. In his structural analysis of all names, not just place names, he devotes a section of the third chapter to toponyms. As noun phrases, he says they function as both the subjects of sentences and the objects of prepositions, specifically locative

ones.<sup>14</sup> He adds, however, that some place names do not take prepositions where you expect them to, or visa versa, and must therefore include internal extra morphemes. According to Van Langendonck, there is an inherent hierarchy where certain types of place names can be distinguished by a zero form, suffix, article, or classifier.<sup>15</sup> After sorting types of place names, Van Langendonck concludes that the places that are least inhabitable, or least likely to be densely populated, take the most lexical classification, so the most human involvement is the least marked form.<sup>16</sup> For example, a sparsely populated place, a place which impinges but little on society, has a name with many qualifiers, such as “The Big Green Distant Hill” whereas a densely populated place has a name with no qualifiers at all, such as “London.”

Van Langendonck goes on to discuss other classifiers and prepositions in relation to place names. While he briefly mentions other studies at the beginning of his section on toponymy (whose findings he either agrees or disagrees with), compared to the corpus on general words, we lack literature on technical linguistic analyses of names as distinct from words. For example, the only other even partially analytical study I found is that of N.S. Sahu. In the introduction to his book *Toponymy*, he references Chomsky’s claim that place names, like other proper nouns, are not compatible with determiners, whereas common nouns are.<sup>17</sup> This broad statement seems to counter Van

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<sup>14</sup> Willy Van Langendonck, *Trends in Linguistics: Theory and Typology of Proper Names* (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2007), 204

<sup>15</sup> Van Langendonck, *Trends in Linguistics*, 204

<sup>16</sup> Van Langendonck, *Trends in Linguistics*, 209

<sup>17</sup> N.S. Sahu, *Toponymy (A Genre in Onomastic Science) A Linguistic Study* (Delhi: H.S. Juneja, 1989), xvi

Langendonck's hierarchical claim about different types of place names taking different lexical classification, or different types of determiners. Sahu goes on to do a formal inventory of place names in India, some of which is technically phonological, but his conclusion is cultural, not analytical. Since he does not try to prove a grammatical point, as Van Langendonck does, Van Langendonck's study seems alone in incorporating names into pure structural linguistics.

Van Langendonck's study is morphologically interesting because it breaks down place names to determine how they fit into sentences and ties this analysis to human habitation in the physical places. It is interesting because it is an attempt to connect structural linguistics with the human significance of names. In the scheme of overall significance, however, the question hardly seems fundamental. Since names do not take their significance from structural linguistics, meaning that as a category outside their function as words, they do not contribute to our understanding of the grammar of language, these structural analyses are less exciting than the more interdisciplinary studies of names. Since Sahu comments on the same linguistic feature that Van Langendonck studies, the determiner-- although they disagree about its distribution-- may be an angle from which structural linguists will find significance in names. Yet a structural study of this type that tied in to the human significance of names would be a study of a new type (for more on this idea see the final section of this paper). For the moment,

with so few studies of this nature, it seems that structural linguistics is not an optimal way to understand names.

Since attempted analyses of toponyms along the lines of structural linguistics are limited and have yet to determine the significance of place names to human culture, scholars have found other ways to study toponyms. One of these approaches, the philosophical angle, explicitly addresses the difference between a word and a name. Whereas words are completely arbitrary combinations of sounds, attached randomly to tangible ideas and entities in the real world, and linguistics finds meaning by analyzing them in the context of the sentence of other words rather than by their relation to that to which they refer, names seem to be more closely connected to that which they reference. Interesting questions regarding names seem to be theoretical. If a name looks like a word, and is an arbitrary sound combination that refers to something in the real world, like a word, how is it different? What exactly is a name? Much of this literature on names looks at the referential quality of toponyms from a philosophical perspective to determine how names are related to the items they reference.

Although it is words that are arbitrary, philosophers see names, not words, as “senseless.” As Nuessel writes in his introduction, quoting Markey, “it is generally accepted by philosophers and logicians that, while names have reference, they lack sense.”<sup>18</sup> Nuessel goes on to explain the philosophical approach that a name describes something with specific properties; it is used for reference. He does not, however, explain how they lack sense. Van

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<sup>18</sup> Nuessel, *The Study of Names*, 1

Langendonck quotes a similar statement of Lyons' writing: "it is widely, though not universally, accepted that proper names do not have sense."<sup>19</sup> He considers "sense" to be their "asserted lexical meaning." Using Ullmann's example, Van Langendonck explains that one cannot ask "What is the meaning of London?" One cannot understand a proper name, only that to which it refers. We can know that a certain busy place with a lot of houses will be called a city, but not that it will be called specifically London.<sup>20</sup> Van Langendonck goes on to discuss different meanings names might have due to their grammatical placement in different sentences, but abstractly as words, names appear to "lack sense." Despite this senselessness because we cannot predict that the place we know of as London will be called as such, once determined, names become synecdoches: the name represents the place. The dichotomy between senseless toponyms and toponyms as synecdoches leads to the philosophical question: How is a toponym connected to the place it references?

Although abstractly names lack the sense that words have, they have semantic meanings words do not. According to Sahu, "proper names, far from having no meaning, have MORE meaning than common nouns."<sup>21</sup> Van Langendonck writes that there is knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description: either a name refers to something like any arbitrary word or it gives us ideas about that something by its inherent qualities. While we cannot attribute any extra meaning to an item by the sound of the word by which we

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<sup>19</sup> Van Langendonck, *Trends in Linguistics*, 84

<sup>20</sup> Van Langendonck, *Trends in Linguistics*, 85

<sup>21</sup> Sahu, *Toponymy*, xiv

call that item by, we can subjectively judge an item by its name. Van Langendonck gives the example of someone named Sophroniscus “whom we immediately think is a man and Greek and Socrates’ father”<sup>22</sup> I extend this notion to less specific examples such as Mary, a name that we immediately assume is feminine and Christian. Similarly with toponyms, when hearing the name Massapequa, we think of a Native American place. While a language does have arbitrary words that were borrowed from other languages, these words lose their borrowed connotations quickly because they have no bearing on the words’ meanings. Borrowed words such as the English “raccoon,” which was also originally Native American, soon feel just as arbitrary as say, “cat,” which has been in the English language since 800.<sup>23</sup> Unlike words, the sound combinations in a name tell us about the entity it references.

In his essay “Language and Nature,” Noam Chomsky discusses reference with the example of the name of a city: London. He writes that “London is not a place. Rather, it is at a place, though it is not the things at the place, which could be radically changed or moved, leaving London intact.”<sup>24</sup> According to Chomsky, if London were demolished and rebuilt somewhere else, those new buildings, wherever their geographical location in the world, would be the new London. Chomsky thinks place names refer to an entity, a community, something human, rather than the geographical location of the place (excluding names such as the Atlantic Ocean or the Nile River, which

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<sup>22</sup> Van Langendonck, *Trends in Linguistics*, 26

<sup>23</sup> Oxford English Dictionary. <http://dictionary.oed.com>.

<sup>24</sup> Noam Chomsky, “Language and Nature,” *Mind* New Series, Vol. 104, No. 413 (Jan 1995): 21

don't have any people and aren't capable of relocating). But what then, Chomsky asks, is a nameable thing?<sup>25</sup> He writes that the United States is nameable even though it is discontinuous. As the literature will continue to demonstrate, we name the places that have meaning to us. While we need names for geographical locations on the globe so that we can interact with others in our daily lives (“meet me at the river”), the most interesting philosophical questions about names involve human connections. “London” is not a specific geographical point on the globe, but rather, it refers to a city with certain qualities, created by and inhabited by certain people. It has a human character. Of course by the very act of naming them, we have connected even the most remote place to human society. Therefore no place is purely geographical; places are connected to human society through their names.

Whereas philosophical literature asks to what a name refers, it is the anthropological literature that questions how humans interact with the names. Anthropological scholars of toponymy ask how a name functions in a society and what it means to a people. At the end of Sahu's study on Indian place names, he concludes, “the study of place-names is indispensable for a better understanding of contemporary religion, history, and culture of the area of question.”<sup>26</sup> This is the underlying assumption in anthropologically-angled studies of toponymy: studying place names is important for understanding the culture. Sahu looks briefly at phonetic and morphemic structures of toponyms

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<sup>25</sup> Chomsky, “Language and Nature,” 22

<sup>26</sup> Sahu, *Toponymy*, 196

(structural linguistic analysis, as I mentioned earlier) and then looks at what/who places are named after, and which languages the names seem to come from. In the end, he draws a conclusion based not on his linguistic analysis, but on these other areas of study relating more to the people who use the names. However Sahu's conclusion is the basic assumption of anthropological scholars of toponymy: rather than study toponyms as abstract words (as structural linguists or philosophers would) anthropological scholars situate them in the context of a society (or societies), and look at them through the lens of the given culture to derive meaning from how the people incorporate them into language and society. We cannot understand how place names are meaningful in a society (only, as Sahu concludes, that they *are* meaningful) unless we understand how place names fit into that people's view of the world.

I gained a fuller understanding of the anthropological literature on toponyms from Gary Witherspoon's book *Language and Art in the Navajo Universe*, which reveals the Navajo view of the world to a Western outsider. Witherspoon explains that the Navajo categorize their world differently from Westerners: building it, for example, around the concept of movement, dividing it into different kinship systems, and disallowing certain sentences such as "the horse kicked the man" because cultural ideas of agency control who can grammatically act on whom.<sup>27</sup> Through these examples Witherspoon shows that we, westerners, cannot easily understand how the Navajo people

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<sup>27</sup> Gary Witherspoon, *Language and Art in the Navajo Universe* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1977), 63-67.

view the world because we do not speak their language and therefore we carve up the world differently in our minds. Since toponyms are part of language, they too help us carve up our world. Scholars who study the toponyms of other cultures, specifically nonwestern cultures, learn that these names not only play important roles in the cultures, but play different roles than they do for Westerners and function in ways of which we cannot easily conceive.

Such was the lesson that Keith Basso, a Westerner studying the Apache, learned. In his book *Wisdom sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache*, Basso recounts how he mispronounced the name of a place and offended his Apache guides who told him he was thereby misquoting the ancestors.<sup>28</sup> Whereas Westerners think of toponyms as words that reference a geographic location, or perhaps more specifically, an entity like the essence of a city, the Apache people think of place names as the speech of their ancestors, something that cannot be rushed or mistaken because it was created exactly that way for a reason. Rather than irreconcilable ideas of a place name, Apache and Western place names embody different ways of seeing the world, both of which use place names as integral parts of the cultural, but relate to them differently.

Furthermore, according to Basso, Apache place names also summon mental and emotional associations of time, space and the history of oneself and others.<sup>29</sup> There are no placeless stories.<sup>30</sup> When a toponym is mentioned

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<sup>28</sup> Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 10

<sup>29</sup> Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, 76

<sup>30</sup> Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, 87

as where some event once occurred, the Apache remember the event and lessons they learned from it. For example, Basso writes about an Apache girl who came to an Apache ceremony with her hair in curlers even though all the Apache women at the ceremony wear their hair down. Later her grandmother tells her a story about an Apache policeman who behaved too much like a white man. Now if anyone mentions the place “Men Stand Above Here And There,” which is where the policeman lived, she thinks about the lesson she learned from the story. As she says, “I know that place. It stalks me everyday.”<sup>31</sup> The Apache bring about self-awareness through landscape reference.<sup>32</sup> To understand the meaning of place names to the Western Apache, we must understand how the society mentions them to mean whole sentences, whole stories, to teach lessons. People remember the places names and the place names become part of the culture, in different ways for each individual culture depending on how its sees and categorizes its world. Anthropological studies such as Basso’s demonstrate how humans interact with place names.

The width of a continent and then an ocean away, in Ireland, Brian Friel too discusses how humans interact with place names that carry meaning. In his play *Translations*, instead of attempting to understand a new dimension of meaning through a particular academic specialization, Friel’s humorous yet moving fictional piece touches a laymen’s audience. Whereas according to Basso, when one says an Apache toponym one remembers and learns from the

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<sup>31</sup> Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, 56-57

<sup>32</sup> Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, 81

past events that have happened at that spot, Friel struggles with a culture that is forgetting its stories: in Friel's play the Gaelic toponyms in Ireland are being replaced by English ones. The characters in the play question whether they are losing just a sequence of sounds that can be replaced by another, more Anglicized equivalent, or the meanings and stories that go with the names. At first many of the characters do not mind the Anglicization of the names, but then one character tells a story of a place:

“We’ve come to this crossroads... and why do we call it Tobair Vree? I’ll tell you why. Tobair means well. But what does Vree mean? It’s a corruption of Brian- (Gaelic pronunciation) Brian- and erosion of Tobair Bhriain. Because a hundred-and-fifty years ago there used to be a well there, not at the crossroads, mind you- that would be too simple- but in a field close to the crossroads. And an old man called Brian, whose face was disfigured by an enormous growth, got it into his head that the water in that well was blessed; and every day for seven months he went there and bathed his face in it. But the growth didn’t go away; and one morning Brian was found drowned in that well. And ever since that crossroads is known as Tobair Vree- even though that well has long since dried up. I know the story because my grandfather told it to me. But ask Doalty- or Maire- or Bridget- even my father- even Manus- why it’s called Tobair Vree; and do you think they’ll know? I know they don’t know. So the question I put to you, Lieutenant, is this: what do we do with a name like that? Do we scrap Tobair Vree altogether and call it- what?- The Cross? Crossroads? Or do we keep piety with a man long dead, long forgotten, his name ‘eroded’ beyond recognition, whose trivial little story nobody in the parish remembers?”<sup>33</sup>

A new name for the place could ignore the story completely and most people would not care because they do not know the story, but to those people with roots in Tobair Vree, who do know the story, changing the name destroys something about the place. With this character’s anxiety Friel demonstrates

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<sup>33</sup> Brian Friel, *Translations* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), 53

how toponyms are deeply entrenched in culture; the name itself cannot be extracted for substitution without consequence to someone. While it seems that as the culture changed in Ireland, people ceased to value the toponyms and changed them easily, the existence of this play demonstrates that the names had had meaning to some people. They were culturally significant enough for Friel to make a statement about their destruction.

Both culturally- and politically-angled literature address name translation. Translation, one type of name change, is usually a political act. Translation and other forms of name change can only become politically powerful because the meaning of names is embedded in cultures and people such as Friel's characters become emotionally charged when translating a name destroys its meaning. Whereas it may not be easy to directly translate a word from one language to another given that the new language may not have a word with quite the same meaning, because of the cultural significance embedded in names it is impossible to carry their entire meaning into a new translation of that name: "Brian's Well" does not have the same meaning to the people of Tobair Vree as the Gaelic name. Maybe the words have slightly different connotations, maybe the English language construction with the apostrophe just does not feel right, or maybe "Vree" makes travelers think of the story in a way "Brian" cannot. For whatever reason, even exact translation does not effectively maintain the story of the place because the story is connected to the very Gaelicness of the name.

Apart from the references in Friel's play, I haven't discovered a lot of literature on translation as a type of toponymic change. In her article "Irish Place names: post-colonial location," however, Catherine Nash expands on the Irish translation example. According to Nash, one way to change a place name from one language to another is to translate phonetically. In Ireland, translators would match Irish toponyms to English words that partially matched the sounds of the Irish name-elements but not the meaning. For example, Muine Beag (little thicket) would become Moneybeg (which now has completely arbitrary meaning).<sup>34</sup> While Nash writes that this happens frequently throughout Ireland, these names "ruptured the relationships between collective indigenous history, culture, identity, and location condensed in native place names."<sup>35</sup> Considering that this type of translation reverts the name back to the purely arbitrary reference of a word and consequently destroys all the cultural significance that seems to make names worth studying, I wonder whether if we understood how names fit into language separately from words, we might fight harder for our toponyms, and consequently our stories.

Translations are a type of name change, which are usually imposed on a society by a political, often colonial, authority. Political literature on names is closely related to anthropological literature. By taking advantage of the importance of toponyms to communities, governments ask how a society can use toponyms to its advantage for power or political control: for example, how

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<sup>34</sup> Catherine Nash, "Irish Place Names: Post-Colonial Locations," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* New Series, 24(4), 1999: 465

<sup>35</sup> Nash, "Irish Place Names," 460

adventitious power (frequently colonizers) can change names to gain control of a people, or how a new government can choose names that aid in the establishment of a state.

In “The Politics of Toponyms in the Pamir Mountains,” Stuart Horsman investigates how political regimes manipulate landscapes via toponyms to promote their own ideological and political objectives.<sup>36</sup> According to Horsman, since bestowing a name on a physical entity is an act of appropriation, with each change in political regime come new names for a given geographic location. Horsman’s article follows the changing regimes in one geographic area, the Pamir Mountains, from Tsarist to Soviet I to Soviet II to Post Soviet, to trace the ideological changes in the names. After analyzing the place names in the Pamir Mountains, Horsman concludes that the more urban a place is, or the closer it is geographically to political power, the more likely it is to be renamed.<sup>37</sup> This finding presents an intriguing homology to Van Langendonck’s claim that the more populated a place is, the fewer qualifiers it needs. Densely populated places, places most directly connected to the human experience, have the least qualified and least static names. Nobody cares enough about “the big green distant hill” to change it, or even properly name it. We continue to add qualifiers to differentiate it from other hills. In the same way that a place rich in human culture received an original name that needed no qualifiers, this same place is a prime candidate for a new name when someone wants political power over a society. A new

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<sup>36</sup> Stuart Horsman, “The Politics of Toponyms in the Pamir Mountains,” *Area* Vol. 38, No. 3 (September 2006): 279

<sup>37</sup> Horsman, “The Politics of Toponyms,” 289

name could link a political agenda with a place, as is evident from the fact that a simple name (needing no qualifications) is already linked to the culture of the place. In this brief study Horsman determines that changing place names, especially particularly meaningful ones, is part of gaining political power. Therefore place names can be instrumental to attaining and holding political power.

Cohen and Kliot discuss ideological manipulation by place naming from a different angle in their article “Place-Names in Israel’s Ideological Struggle over the Administered Territories.” Rather than looking at the same places diachronically to see whether changes in toponyms are determined by politics (or how often) as Horsman does, they assume place name changes *are* political and look at one political act, building the state of Israel, to determine how a government used place names to further its aim. They see place naming as a symbolic expression of Israeli nationalism against the Arabs.<sup>38</sup> Cohen and Kliot posit two types of renaming: for “essentialism or continuity” or for “epochalism or change.”<sup>39</sup> In naming Israel, the Jews were trying to establish continuity with a biblical and Jewish past as well as modern independence created through military heroism.<sup>40</sup> Names from the Bible or the Talmud reinforce continuity with the history of the Jewish people: that this land should be their homeland because God gave it to them. As much as the leaders establishing the state of Israel wanted to reinforce the continuity with

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<sup>38</sup> Saul B. Cohen and Nurit Kliot, “Place-Names in Israel’s Ideological Struggle over the Administered Territories,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 82(4): 654

<sup>39</sup> Cohen and Kliot, “Place-Names in Israel’s Ideological Struggle,” 653

<sup>40</sup> Cohen and Kliot, “Place-Names in Israel’s Ideological Struggle,” 659

the biblical history of the landscape, they also used names to exemplify the change to a modern state by commemorating Zionist leaders, military heroes, and other symbolic figures in toponyms. By their logical associations, these names are supposed to build a modern nation.<sup>41</sup> Calling places by the names of Israeli heroes creates solidarity and unites the newly formed nation of Israel. As much as Israel wants to connect to the Bible to legitimize its claim as a nation on that specific land, it also wants to reinforce its modernity to build up the solidarity of the new nation. Furthermore, using place names that build Israeli solidarity alienates and enrages the Arabs with whom the Israelis continuously struggle over land. Because toponyms have meaning to a people, Cohen and Kliot could look at Israeli toponyms from a political angle to find significance in their systematic creation or change: toponyms as instruments of nation building.

Meron Benvenisti raises a countering point at the end of his book *Conflicts and Contradictions*. In the epilogue entitled “What’s in a Name?” he writes that whenever the political elites rename the land, the people are torn about what to call the place because those who dwell there and connect to the land do not take easily to name changes. Furthermore Benvenisti explains that in Israel a place is frequently destroyed along with its name.<sup>42</sup> When officially changing a place name cannot change how the people who encounter the place understand it (they find meaning in its Arab name), the government may prefer to simply destroy the place, rather than risk the

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<sup>41</sup> Cohen and Kliot, “Place-Names in Israel’s Ideological Struggle,” 662

<sup>42</sup> Meron Benvenisti, *Conflicts and Contradictions*, (New York: Villard Books, 1986), 196

remnants of an Arab connection to the land. Changing place names can accomplish some political aims, but other times governments must take more drastic measures because people are too attached to the name they already know. Benvenisti gives personal examples of how he understands the character of the land through the name by which he knew it growing up, even if it might have been an Arab name. Toponyms leave a strong mark.

When governments, whether more nationalistic such as in Israel or colonial as in Ireland, destroy the meaning of a place by changing its name, they wound the stories of the people who are connected to the place. While political literature on toponyms recognizes this loss, similarly to Cohen and Kliot, Nash analyzes types of name change with a positive undertone of community building. Nash notes processes of capitalist modernization, colonial settlement, state formation, national independence, or official commemoration, which are all forced upon a people by a governing body.<sup>43</sup> She explains that renaming places is key to nation building because both shared language and shared land are vital to nationhood.<sup>44</sup> Toponyms connect the language to the land; they build nations. Therefore she concludes that place names are an instrumental tool of the politically power-laden that, because of their meanings to a society, can be used to both build it and erode it. Because of the culturally rooted meanings of toponyms, their change can unite a society just as easily as it can erode one.

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<sup>43</sup> Nash, "Irish Place Names," 460

<sup>44</sup> Nash, "Irish Place Names," 461

Rather than furthering political aims through toponymic change, political questions also arise over names that offend certain groups of people because the combination of sounds used to make up a name also makes up a word with a certain “inappropriate” meaning. Mark Monmonier addresses names that were erased and other touchy subjects in his book *From Squaw Tit to Whorehouse Meadow*. Looking at the toponyms in (mainly) the United States, Monmonier analyzes the ones over which people have argued and asks what the government is doing now. His topics range from compassion for native stories, to control, decency, and aesthetics of the place names in question. Is it politically correct to name a mountain “squaw” because squaw is not a politically correct term? His book is very geographically oriented, explaining the governing bodies of names and the maps and statistics used to find the names in conflict. In the literature on toponymy that I read, the business of mapping was integral: cartography, gazetteers, and official naming bodies were all mentioned, to the greatest extent of all in the work of Monmonier. These topics would be yet another, more simply geographic, avenue for a literature on place names. Such a record-keeping viewpoint, however, takes the names out of their context as meaningful language, and therefore I leave that type of literature out of my review.

We can see from the literature on toponyms that it is their original non-arbitrary meaning, plus the following meanings people attach to them, that merits studying them separately from words. Names have referential meaning beyond the capacity of the word. Therefore rather than analyze them

similarly to typical words via structural linguistics, or organize them purely geographically, scholars study toponyms through the lenses of other disciplines that can tap into their wealth of cultural meaning in a variety of ways.

Philosophical literature determines that place names usually refer to humanly constructed entities rather than geographic points on the globe. Anthropological literature attempts to understand how toponyms function as integral parts of specific cultures, finding that we cannot easily translate place names because of their embedded cultural meaning. Finally political literature looks at how governments have changed toponyms to further their own political aims: to build community or break down enemies. Names, specifically toponyms, which surface in so many academic disciplines, represent the human experience: human connection to the world through language. Through an interdisciplinary analysis of toponyms, we can understand the importance of names outside of their role as words. This lends itself to an expanded understanding of sociolinguistics, how language and society interact, as a way to give toponyms a linguistic niche.

#### IV. A Case Study of a Toponym: “New Orleans”

In southern Louisiana, at a bend in the Mississippi river, is the city called “New Orleans.” I shall employ it here as a real-world example of various themes that emerge in the literature on toponyms. It demonstrates the political implications of renaming, a toponym as a metaphor for human experiences, and the connection of a toponym to the place it references. In the

following section, I take themes from the interdisciplinary analyses of names and put them in the context of a specific place-name. The interdisciplinary angles illuminate how the significance of the name “New Orleans” unites place and language. Because names take on meaning that is inseparable from human culture, the linguistics of names must be the linguistics of society.

Founded in 1718 by the French explorer Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville, New Orleans was originally named “Nouvelle Orléans” for the Regent of France, the Duc d’Orléans.<sup>45</sup> The present name, New Orleans, is a direct English translation of the original French name. Most of the French founders supported this name (whereas they tended to dislike the names of other colonies in Louisiana) because it sounded regal and French.<sup>46</sup> The name “Nouvelle Orléans” was meant to project a specific image to the rest of the world. The right name demands the right respect.

Once a sequence of sounds is used as a toponym, it is released from the rules of grammar that confine words because it more importantly functions as a connection to the place to which it refers. In his book, *Fabulous New Orleans*, Lyle Saxon quotes an early inhabitant of Nouvelle Orléans, Father Charlevoix, saying, “Those who coined the name Nouvelle Orléans must have thought that Orléans was of feminine gender. But what does it matter? The custom is established, and custom rises above grammar.”<sup>47</sup> According to this French settler, the name incorporates incorrect grammar. While it might be

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<sup>45</sup> Lyle Saxon, *Fabulous New Orleans*, (New Orleans: Robert L. Crager & Company, 1954), 78

<sup>46</sup> Saxon, *Fabulous New Orleans*, 80

<sup>47</sup> Saxon, *Fabulous New Orleans*, 78

incorrect to interpret the city name as feminine, it is more commonly assumed that place names lack gender, that the rules of grammar are more flexible with names. France is the nation with *l'Académie Française*, an institution devoted to keeping the French language pure and its grammar correctly used. If names really functioned as words, in France particularly, names would bend to established grammatical rules. That custom, rather than grammatical rules, determines the form of the name New Orleans, emphasizes that names have meaning separately from the everyday words that are confined regimentally by the grammar of *L'Académie*. “Nouvelle Orléans” kept its original form because from its beginning it took meaning from the entity to which it refers. Through the example of Nouvelle Orléans we see that for names, grammatical rules are inconsequential, and referential meaning trumps any grammatical importance.

While the name “Nouvelle Orléans” was chosen to embody European regality, the street names of the original streets too indicate the spirit in which the city was founded. In his book, *The World That Made New Orleans*, Ned Sublette writes, “the streets of this new capital of La Louisiane would have no Indian names like Natchitoches or Biloxi [other settlements in the area]. They would bear the names of rich Parisians who would never cross the ocean...”<sup>48</sup>

In addition to Royal Street, there are streets named for prominent French families such as Chartres (for the duc de Chartres), Bourbon, Dauphin (for the eldest son of the king of France), and Bienville Street (for the governor),

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<sup>48</sup> Ned Sublette, *The World That Made New Orleans*, (Chicago: Lawrence Hill books, 2008), 53.

among others.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, the northern boundary of the city is Lake Pontchartrain, named for Louis Phélypeaux, comte de Pontchartrain, a French government official during the reign of Louis XIV.<sup>50</sup> These names emphasize that at its founding, despite its location across an ocean, Nouvelle Orléans was French, and proud to be French. Saxon mentions how it was discussed in cafés in Paris.<sup>51</sup> The founders of Nouvelle Orléans did indeed want it to be a prominent place whose name could be mentioned proudly in France. Today the street names of the city portray its complex history. Whereas a collection of streets such as Valence, Jena, Milan, and Austerlitz celebrate the battles of Napoleon, there are also street names for Washington, Jefferson, and Jackson, the three slave-owning presidents, plus for a number of luminaries of the Confederacy such as Lee, Davis, and Beauregard.<sup>52</sup> Then there are names of a different cast such as Music, Mystery, and Pleasure, which the city values. At the time of founding, the city was European, but it was also to have an American history.

The founders of Nouvelle Orléans picked that name specifically, in a political act of naming. Just as political leaders founding the state of Israel renamed places with biblical references or commemorating Zionist leaders to try to unite the Israeli community around its past and its present, the founders of Nouvelle Orléans renamed it to create a French territory. I write renamed

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<sup>49</sup> Saxon, *Fabulous New Orleans*, 82

<sup>50</sup> "Fishing Fools Louisiana- History of Lake," <http://fishingfoolsla.com/history.aspx>

<sup>51</sup> Grace King, *New Orleans: The Place and The People*, ( New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968), 35.

<sup>52</sup> Ned Sublette, *The World That Made New Orleans*, (Chicago: Lawrence Hill books, 2008), 5-6.

rather than named because Native Americans already inhabited that area of southern Louisiana when the French arrived. The Native Americans had built their villages around a body of water they called Bayouk Choupik after a type of mudfish. When the French decided to build a city on the Mississippi River they renamed Bayouk Choupic as Bayou St. Jean (which became St. John after the next translation).<sup>53</sup> (See Appendix). “St. Jean” has the same prestigious connotations as “Nouvelle Orléans.” It is a European name meant to commemorate someone of cultural importance, in this case a saint, rather than the Native American name which references a type of fish.

Interestingly enough, the French settlers adopted the Native American word “bayou,” which describes the watery topography. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word “bayou” which is “the name given (chiefly in the southern States of N. America) to the marshy off-shoots and overflowings of lakes and rivers” entered the English language in reference to New Orleans in 1766, after the French settled there but before the city became part of the United States.<sup>54</sup> We can presume the word entered the French language around the same time from the Native American language of the area. Perhaps names that describe landscape features are not threatening, or do not evoke unwanted associations, whereas to the French settlers “Choupik” either had no meaning or evoked the wrong meaning for their new city. Instead they wanted a French name that suggested images of European society, so they renamed the area.

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<sup>53</sup> “New Orleans History- Lake Pontchartrain,” 2000. Altrue, Inc.  
<http://www.stphilipneri.org/teacher/pontchartrain/section.php?id=175>

<sup>54</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, <http://dictionary.oed.com>

As we saw in the literature, there are also other ways to gain political control through names through types of translation. The French could have directly translated “Choupik” (provided they could ask its meaning). While a mudfish could have meant greatness to the Native Americans (or not, and perhaps that did not matter to them), it could not trigger thoughts of appropriate grandeur for the French. They could also have pronounced the phonemes of “Choupik” in a French way (Tschoupique), as the English did to the Gaelic place names in Ireland. Whereas, according to Nash, the English were looking to make the Irish places inconsequential, however, the French wanted grandeur for New Orleans. Thus the French renamed the area in the way that best promoted their political agenda for the place. These different types of re-naming aid specific types of political conquest by making people believe certain characteristics about a place, in this case that Nouvelle Orléans partook of France’s reflected grandeur.

Overall, the French replaced the Native American names, and the French names stood up to future political conquests. Despite the many Native Americans living in Nouvelle Orléans at the time of the French settlement, their place names disappeared quickly and many of the Native American people were eventually displaced as well.<sup>55</sup> Unlike the Native Americans, however, the French had a hold on their names. Neither the Spanish nor the Americans replaced the French toponyms in Louisiana. Perhaps this is because the new European conquerors had similar colonial images, images

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<sup>55</sup> “New Orleans History- Lake Pontchartrain,”  
<http://www.stphilipneri.org/teacher/pontchartrain/section.php?id=175>

that the name “Nouvelle Orléans” already embodied. Why change a name that already makes the place feel important?

While the arrival of foreign settlers who moved in alongside the original French settlers could easily have compromised the French character of Nouvelle Orléans, the other settlers rapidly assimilated, possibly due to a name that made the city proud to be French and the French proud to own it. According to Saxon, many German settlers came to Nouvelle Orléans in 1726, but found themselves quickly becoming accustomed to the French culture there.<sup>56</sup> As they intermarried with the French, their family names rapidly assimilated into the French ones.<sup>57</sup> They may have been hard-working people who contributed significantly to the colonization of Louisiana, but their identities as Germans folded into the French character of Nouvelle Orléans. Then in 1762 the King of France gave Louisiana, including Nouvelle Orléans, to the King of Spain. The citizens of Nouvelle Orléans felt cut off from everything they knew, with the English controlling the Mississippi to the north and the Spanish controlling everything around them.<sup>58</sup> It took a long time for governors to arrive from Spain and as they did, the people of Nouvelle Orléans threatened to revolt. In the end, however, the Spanish and French intermarried into a blending of cultures, termed Creole.<sup>59</sup> Creole eventually stopped signifying someone of purely French and Spanish heritage and came

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<sup>56</sup> Saxon, *Fabulous New Orleans*, 94

<sup>57</sup> Saxon, *Fabulous New Orleans*, 96

<sup>58</sup> Saxon, *Fabulous New Orleans*, 135

<sup>59</sup> Saxon, *Fabulous New Orleans*, 141

to mean the mixed cultures of the people of the city.<sup>60</sup> Even under Spanish rule, Nouvelle Orléans would not totally compromise its French identity, and instead made the Spanish compromise to it. The persistence of the French identity of Nouvelle Orléans stemmed from the name the original settlers picked, a name that reflected the type of city it was to be. At this point, the name still embodied its original meaning: to convey the European grandeur of the colony.

In 1803 the United States purchased Louisiana from the French (who had regained Louisiana from the Spanish in a treaty in 1800) and the citizens of Nouvelle Orléans were utterly disappointed again. They considered themselves a civilized European city and wanted nothing to do with the Americans, whom they considered barbarians.<sup>61</sup> Like the Spanish before them, it took a while for Americans to move to Nouvelle Orléans. When they did, they clashed with the Creole “eat, drink, and be merry” ideology that Saxon describes. Eventually, however, the Americans too blended in with the French and Spanish settlers of Nouvelle Orléans until Nouvelle Orléans became a Creole city with a French history and an American population.<sup>62</sup> For about a century “Nouvelle Orléans” meant a proud French culture that could not be compromised. When the place name eventually changed from “Nouvelle Orléans” to “New Orleans” it was directly translated. While the name continued to reflect the grandeur of the French duke for whom it was named, it also reflected the new American identity of the population, which

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<sup>60</sup> Edward J. Branley, “On Being Creole,” <http://www.gumbopages.com/being-creole.html>

<sup>61</sup> Saxon, *Fabulous New Orleans*, 160-161

<sup>62</sup> Saxon, *Fabulous New Orleans*, 162

the people finally embraced. The Americans may also have liked the “New” in the city’s name, interpreting the translated “New” as the new identity of the American New Orleans. By translating just one morpheme of the name (and leaving “Orleans” relatively untouched), the Americans also claim New Orleans as their own. Translation was finally another political name change, and it began a new age wherein the name of the city came to symbolize different notions.

Once New Orleans became an American city, its translated name ceased to evoke feelings of French royal pride. The name “New Orleans” became divorced from its original meaning, the reason for which the name had been bestowed upon the city. Its prior meaning became opaque to its own citizens. At this point “New Orleans” took on new meanings and symbolized the city in new ways, becoming a metaphor for all that the city had come to mean to its people, rather than influencing how they should view the city, as it once had. Whereas the name once implied what the city should be, it now received its meaning from the people of the city. The new metaphorical meanings of “New Orleans” all stem from the connection of a group of people to a particular geographic location and the culture that emerged from this unification.

Ask one hundred Americans today, in 2008, what the name “New Orleans” means to them. First, they will probably mention Hurricane Katrina. Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans and the Gulf Coast on August 29,

2005, displacing about 500,000 people, half of those from New Orleans.<sup>63</sup>

“New Orleans” now means death and destruction. It triggers images of stranded people, chaos, poverty, racism, and government inaction. “New Orleans” reminds Americans how their government failed to help its own citizens as they perished in flood waters. Today these negative images may well be the primary meaning of the toponym “New Orleans.”

Rewind a few years to 2004. If anyone had thought to ask Americans then what the name “New Orleans” meant, they would have received different answers. Most likely, “New Orleans” meant jazz, Mardi Gras, Cajun culture, and the Mississippi River. These are the images that “New Orleans” provokes in the mind of authors who wrote histories of the city before Hurricane Katrina struck. These are the first images of an opaque “New Orleans,” images that became attached to the name, but were not originally meant to go with the name. While the images are divorced from the name itself, however, because “New Orleans” triggers these associations, it continues to have meaning as a metaphor despite political disruption of its original meaning.

After the toponym became opaque, “New Orleans” meant, first and foremost Mardi Gras. The first sentence in Lyle Saxon’s book *Fabulous New Orleans*, published in 1954, is “the very name ‘New Orleans’ brings to mind a Mardi Gras pageant moving through the streets at night...”<sup>64</sup> For Saxon, writing about the city long before Hurricane Katrina, but well into its American existence, the name itself has significant meaning. This meaning is

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<sup>63</sup> Louise McKinney, *New Orleans: A Cultural History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 229

<sup>64</sup> Saxon, *Fabulous New Orleans*, vii

a party, one that New Orleans celebrates uniquely and more passionately than most other places in the world. Primarily, the name “New Orleans” means Mardi Gras, an unbuttoned, even licentious frolic which reflects the character of the city. Similarly, in her book *New Orleans: A Cultural History*, published in 2006, Louise McKinney writes, “it is Mardi Gras that most people think of when they think ‘New Orleans’ and it is the quintessential feast day that reflects the character of the city.”<sup>65</sup> McKinney’s book was published after Katrina, and includes an epilogue about the effects of the hurricane. Yet for the majority of her book, she discusses the New Orleans that had just been destroyed, and what it meant to people before the hurricane. The answer, as Saxon says, is that “New Orleans” means a party: Mardi Gras.

Other reoccurring themes in the literature about New Orleans are jazz and Cajun food. In her epilogue McKinney quotes one New Orleans evacuee saying, “New Orleans has brought two major things to this world... its food and its music.”<sup>66</sup> This is the site where both Cajun food and jazz music originate. The term for the most well known New Orleans delicacy, gumbo, has become a metaphor for the city itself. Gumbo typically symbolizes the city as a mixture, or a melting pot. According to Ned Sublette in his book *The World that Made New Orleans*, this idea is actually a misrepresentation of New Orleans. In gumbo, a stew served over rice, one can taste each individual flavor, the layers that have made this mixed whole.<sup>67</sup> It is this mixture of

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<sup>65</sup> McKinney, *New Orleans: A Cultural History*, 216

<sup>66</sup> McKinney, *New Orleans: A Cultural History*, 230

<sup>67</sup> Ned Sublette, *The World That Made New Orleans*, (Chicago: Lawrence Hill books, 2008), 117.

French, Spanish, African, and American culture that gives the city its gumbo character and fostered a new type of music: jazz. To the people whose lifestyle includes jazz or Cajun food, “New Orleans” will always trigger these associations.

Finally, New Orleans means the Mississippi River. When Saxon hears the name “New Orleans,” he also thinks of the river. “The city of New Orleans must forever be associated with the Mississippi River, for the city was built to guard the mouth of this great stream and owes its existence to its geographical position.”<sup>68</sup> The particular geographic location of New Orleans gives this city much of its character. It is a city of survivors, which its residents consider a defining characteristic of the city. McKinney writes “New Orleans has become known as a place that perpetuates year-round excess -- even when the Mississippi River’s waters threaten to inundate the city.”<sup>69</sup> Similarly Saxon writes, if a tad fulsomely, “The old city of New Orleans was of intense personality. Time and decay have not killed its pristine charm.”<sup>70</sup> It gets this personality through its vulnerable location on the Mississippi and the resultant hardships its settlers have endured throughout its history. Rather than project an image of European extravagance, “New Orleans” has taken on the image of striving for control of the Mississippi River. Once the name “New Orleans” became opaque, instead of existing devoid of meaning, it came to mean Mardi Gras, Jazz, Cajuns, and the

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<sup>68</sup> Saxon, *Fabulous New Orleans*, 73

<sup>69</sup> McKinney, *New Orleans: A Cultural History*, 215

<sup>70</sup> Saxon, *Fabulous New Orleans*, 279

Mississippi River, images derived from the people and the location of the city itself.

After a toponym becomes opaque, however, it can easily undergo meaning changes. Due to a natural disaster, “New Orleans” suddenly changed to mean, first and foremost, the death and destruction of a hurricane. When they hear “New Orleans,” Americans now think of Hurricane Katrina and all that the disaster taught Americans about their country, their people, and their government. Just as Keith Basso discovered that the Western Apache use place names to mean whole stories and lessons, we can see that Americans too use toponyms in this way. When a toponym stands for a larger idea, it is a metaphor. A toponym as a metaphor is an opaque toponym divorced from its original non-arbitrary meaning, but having acquired a different meaning. Beyond referring to a specific geographical location on a map, “New Orleans” has become a metaphor for Hurricane Katrina, the destruction it entailed, and allegedly racist government inattention. Through this toponym, Americans will always be able to recall what they learned about America from that hurricane. Whether a toponym still means the images originally envisioned for it, or whether once opaque it takes on meanings connected to the human experience at that place, it has a significance connected to societal perceptions that a word lacks.

Because the hurricane destroyed the city, the possibility of relocating-- only a hypothetical debate we encountered earlier in Noam Chomsky’s philosophically theorizing article about place names-- became a genuine and

current question. In trying to determine to what exactly the name of a place refers, Chomsky offered the example of moving all the buildings and people that constitute London to the middle of Africa. He believes that the name “London” would then refer to the city in the middle of Africa. Chomsky’s proposition raises valid, but abstract, philosophical questions. In New Orleans, however, the concept of moving a city is current events. The residents of New Orleans question both whether it would be possible to move the city, and whether it would still be New Orleans if it did not occupy the same geographical space that it always has. Would we, as Chomsky believes in the abstract, call the relocated city New Orleans? Or would it become some other city? The US government has moved disaster-prone towns before. For example, the town of Valmeyer, IL, was moved two kilometers to drier land after the Mississippi flooded it in its original location in 1993. But Valmeyer was home to only 900 people and not particularly rooted in its physical location.<sup>71</sup> Would New Orleans, however, still be called “The Crescent City,” a nickname that is derived from its site in a bend of the Mississippi River? Although on the surface it may seem that the name only references a certain relocatable community, once “New Orleans” became opaque, the culture of the area, so deeply connected to a specific physical site, became the name’s symbolic or metaphorical meaning.

Although President Bush declared that the United States would rebuild New Orleans, a week after Hurricane Katrina decimated New Orleans the idea

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<sup>71</sup> KRT, “Should New Orleans be Rebuilt?” September 2, 2005, <http://www.theage.com.au/news/world/should-new-orleans-be-rebuilt/2005/09/02/1125302726709.html>

of relocating the city was on the table. On September 2, 2005, an Australian news source reported a discussion of relocation in Washington, DC. John Copenhaver, a former southeast regional director for the Federal Emergency Management Agency, stated that the proposition of moving New Orleans was being considered. Among the considerations was the fact that although disaster-prone towns have relocated in the past, “never on the scale of New Orleans, one of the country’s oldest urban areas, home to a half-million people, a major transportation hub and a tourist mecca.”<sup>72</sup> In this context, Copenhaver worries how feasible it is to move such a large population and economic hub. He also worries, however, about losing the historical areas of the city and the tourism they attract. Regardless of whether a move of this proportion is physically or economically feasible, there is an underlying worry about a culture that is inherently part of the physical place when it is called by its name.

On November 20, 2005, David Dillon’s article in *The Dallas Morning News* concluded that the history of flooding in New Orleans “suggests a retreat to higher ground...if New Orleans were merely an abstract planning problem- detached from people, politics and history- that is probably what would happen.” Economically, it is irrational to rebuild a city where it will inevitably fall victim to another natural disaster in the near future. The article mentions that while relocation had succeeded with small towns like Valmeyer, Illinois, a town of 900 people, it would be extremely costly to relocate a city

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<sup>72</sup> KRT, “Should new Orleans be rebuilt?”

the size of New Orleans, which had a population of roughly 223,000 (not including the metro area) before Hurricane Katrina. Regardless of any misgivings about the physical feasibility of relocation, this is also not purely an economic problem. Overall, Dillon argues against relocation because of non-economic reasons. He points out that even if the cost of moving New Orleans outweighed the cost of leaving it vulnerable to another hurricane, New Orleans would be impossible to relocate because “(it) is the least abstract of cities. It is all about people, politics, and history, quirky juxtapositions and exotic textures.” (emphasis added)<sup>73</sup> “New Orleans” means the character of the place, which cannot be divorced from the history that created it, a history that is built around its precarious location.

In a series of letters to the editor responding to an editorial in *The New York Times* in December of 2005 about the imminent death of New Orleans, Jack Bitter wrote “New Orleans need not die. It can be saved for much less than \$32 billion, and no levees need be built. Relocate New Orleans to the nearest area that has never been struck by a hurricane.”<sup>74</sup> Although written many months after Hurricane Katrina, when rebuilding on site had begun, this series of letters reinvigorated the debate about relocating New Orleans. In another letter, Maurie J. Cohen agrees with Bitter, saying, “re-establishment would provide both residents and visitors with a vision for a new New Orleans

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<sup>73</sup> David Dillon, “How should city rebuild neighborhoods and infrastructure, reinvent economy? Problems plentiful, certainties few as Big Easy plans recovery,” *The Dallas Morning News*, November 20, 2005.

<http://www.bringneworleansback.org/Portals/BringNewOrleansback/portal.aspx?tabid=84>

<sup>74</sup> Jack Bittner, “We Just Can’t Let New Orleans Die; [Letter 3],” *The New York Times*, December 11, 2005.

founded on fortitude, resilience, and endurance.”<sup>75</sup> Similarly, Bitter’s letter continued, “human nature will create a vibrant city with all the advantages of modern infrastructure.”<sup>76</sup> As both these proponents of relocating New Orleans emphasize, relocation would mean building a new city with a new vision and a new history. A new city could have many wonderful amenities, including a history of surviving the relocation and a modern infrastructure that would be an improvement to the current New Orleans. But surviving the move could also be interpreted as cowardly escaping from its current location. And a new infrastructure would come at the cost of historic character of the city that the layers of settlers have built over time. A new development of this kind would not be “New Orleans” in all the name has come to mean. For example, it would not be where jazz was born, but could it still be the birthplace of jazz? How would we reconcile our understanding of what “New Orleans” means with what it would become?

In his letter, Cohen remarks on the discrepancies between the possibility of exciting new developments and the character of the city. “New Orleans owed much of its charm to a unique brand of bawdy spontaneity that is inimical with choreographed planning. Many people with deep emotional bonds to the Crescent City would dismiss relocation as tantamount to capitulation.”<sup>77</sup> Since New Orleans grew up in a haphazard way as different people moved in and settled in neighborhoods, either changing or recreating

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<sup>75</sup> Maurie J Cohen, “We Just Can’t Let New Orleans Die; [Letter 4],” *The New York Times*, December 13, 2005.

<sup>76</sup> Jack Bittner, “We Just Can’t Let New Orleans Die; [Letter 3].”

<sup>77</sup> Cohen, “We Just Can’t Let New Orleans Die; [Letter 4].”

that tapestry through central planning would not have the same feelings or reflect the settlers who created the city. It would be surrender to move because it would no longer be New Orleans when existing in a different physical location. Firmly against the relocation of New Orleans, Victoria Cooke responds to these letters writing,

“Most important, New Orleans is not a collection of buildings. New Orleans is the fierce currents of the Mississippi River and the lazy meandering water of Bayou St. John, the centuries-old live oaks that spread their branches to form a canopy over St. Charles Avenue and the swampy lagoons of City Park. Culturally and historically, the city is tied to the land and to the water that surrounds it. You could no more relocate New Orleans than Boston or Philadelphia. It would cease to be New Orleans and become just another suburban city.”<sup>78</sup>

The character of the named place is tied to its geographic location because over time, once the non-arbitrariness of the name is no longer transparent, it is that location which gives the name its meaning.

New Orleans provides a genuine opportunity to relocate a city.

Although in the abstract, it may seem that “London” could be anywhere and it would still be London, it seems that to many residents of New Orleans, their city cannot be located just anywhere. The name “New Orleans” evokes a meaning that can only be associated with the physical space that has always borne that name. Although Americans now associate “New Orleans” primarily with the impact Hurricane Katrina had on their visions of the United States, Hurricane Katrina is itself an image tied to a physical location, added to, but not necessarily replacing, the other ideas “New Orleans” has come to represent since it became American. The images of Mardi Gras, jazz, the

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<sup>78</sup> Victoria Cooke, “The Soul of New Orleans; [Letter],” *The New York Times*, December 17, 2005.

“creolization” mingling of blacks and whites, and the character of a people fighting the Mississippi River cannot be easily relocated to a different physical place.

The relocation of New Orleans reflects the geographic dichotomy between site and situation. New Orleans is located on a vulnerable site where it frequently falls victim to hurricanes and flooding. According to Sublette, “that crescent-shaped riverbend was a terrible place to build a town.”<sup>79</sup> However, New Orleans is located in a terrific situation. It was established there because a city made sense where the Mississippi River flows into the ocean. The French built New Orleans because it was centrally situated for trade; it made its own connections. Sublette continues, “Whoever controlled that port possessed the key to the North American continent.”<sup>80</sup> Any successful city needs both a good site, or physical location, and a good situation, or relationship with the other sites within reach. In its current location, New Orleans has only one of these attributes. Is it worth trading one for the other? Maybe urban planners could find another strategic situation in a less vulnerable site, but any move for this city would surely compromise its situation. It appears that a toponym refers to the combination of the site and the situation and people that have benefited from both over the years. Both site and situation influence the culture that emerges there, and come to be what one understands through the name of the place. Moving New Orleans would neither absolve it from the tensions of this dichotomy, nor let it

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<sup>79</sup> Ned Sublette, *The World That Made New Orleans*, (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 2008), 11.

<sup>80</sup> Ned Sublette, *The World That Made New Orleans*, 11.

continue to be the place of jazz, Cajun food, and Mardi Gras, the imaginary we think of when we hear “New Orleans.”

“New Orleans” is a metaphor for the human relation to a geographical place. The original name reflected the goals of the French settlers. Then, as politics demanded translation, the name became opaque, and it simultaneously took on new meanings associated with its particular physical location: jazz, as in the “Basin Street Blues,” for example. The meaning of the name is embedded in the place where that name took on that meaning and cannot be moved, even when the name shifts to mean the death and destruction caused by a hurricane.

Names are different from words because they are given consciously to emphasize specific connotations, as opposed to being arbitrarily conformed as are most words. Once they become opaque, as “New Orleans” has, they become more closely tied to the cultures that use them because it is culture that then gives a name meaning. The example of “New Orleans” demonstrates concretely that human societal connections give names significance beyond that of the ordinary word. Therefore to fit names into the study of language, we must see them in connection with the people who use them, as other disciplines have, and understand language in the context of those people.

#### V. Toponyms as Sociolinguistics: Three Angles on Place-Names

Through my inquiry into toponymic literature and situation of themes from the literature in the example of “New Orleans,” I conclude names to be a

significant piece of language that should not be overlooked. Although historically, names have remained on the periphery of formal linguistic studies, I believe they are an important aspect of the study of language because a toponym is a link between a place and a culture through language. The challenge is to understand how names fit into the discipline. Therefore the following section is a discussion of names and their relation to formal linguistics.

#### a) Toponymy, Onomastics, and Linguistics

Toponymy, the study of place names, is a part of onomastics, the study of names. But is onomastics part of linguistics, the study of language? Every society has names, which are an integral part of the society's language. In his book *A Theory of Genericization on Brand Name Change*, Shawn Clankie writes, "all languages must have some form of naming, as reference and identification are among the most primary of functions in language."<sup>81</sup> Names let people refer to things and differentiate them from one another. Therefore, names must belong in the study of language. The pertinent question is how to study them meaningfully, so that their essence as a name contributes to a broader understanding of language.

Although Clankie writes that onomastics has historically remained on the periphery of linguistics because of its interdisciplinary nature, he says, "we should recognize the contributions of onomastic study to broader

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<sup>81</sup> Shawn M. Clankie, *A Theory of Genericization on Brand Name Change*, (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), 52

linguistic issues.”<sup>82</sup> For example, we saw earlier that brand name studies support research in sound symbolism. Linguists looking for the intrinsic meaning of sounds examine the sounds in new brand names because these names have been created to trigger specific thoughts and emotions. While I claim that words are arbitrary and these names are chosen because of their societal connotations, sound symbolists would argue that the meaning in these names comes instead from the intrinsic properties of sounds. They then analogize the meaning of sounds in names to those in words in order to argue that the form of a word is not arbitrary. This is one of the few ways in which names have contributed, albeit peripherally, to structural linguistics, a discipline I will address in more detail little later. Throughout the rest of this section, meanwhile, I address how scholars such as Clankie fit names into linguistic studies or conversely, exclude them from the discipline.

In every society, names are constrained at least to some degree by the grammar of the language and the culture speaking the language.

Grammatically, a foreign name will need to conform phonologically and structurally to the language using it.<sup>83</sup> For example, in English we pronounce the name Paris [pærɪs] (*accented on the first syllable*) whereas the French pronounce their capital city [pari] (*accented on the last syllable*). Although in this example both languages have the same sounds, English uses a brighter, harsher first vowel, which is more characteristic of English. Additionally, English speakers pronounce the final /s/, which is silent in French. The two

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<sup>82</sup> Clankie, *A Theory of Genericization on Brand Name Change*, 46

<sup>83</sup> Clankie, *A Theory of Genericization on Brand Name Change*, 58

languages also stress opposite syllables of the name. Cultures also have certain notions of appropriate names.<sup>84</sup> For example in New Zealand, it is illegal to give a child a name that starts with a digit, as the couple Pat and Sheena Wheaton found when they wanted to name their son “4real.”<sup>85</sup> But other cultures deem human names that start with digits completely appropriate. Thus, while all lexical items conform to the grammatical and cultural rules of a language, names do not conform as strictly as most words do.

I demonstrated the flexibility of a name’s conformation to language norms earlier with the example “Nouvelle Orléans,” which allows a feminine adjective to describe a noun that doesn’t necessarily have a gender. Although this lack of conformity pushes names to the edge of linguistic studies, names are still governed, even if more loosely, by the rules of language. The name “Nouvelle Orléans” follows other French language rules such as having the adjective “nouvelle” precede the noun (most French adjectives follow nouns, but “nouvelle” is an exception to the general rule). The grammatical non-conformity of names is also evident in phonology, where speakers accept certain combinations of phonemes in proper names that they would otherwise deem ungrammatical in their language. For example, the name “Bach,” [bax] exists in English although English lacks the phoneme [x]. While names therefore fit into structural linguistics, they have not contributed to studies that

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<sup>84</sup> Clankie, *A Theory of Genericization on Brand Name Change*, 58

<sup>85</sup> Phil Mercer, “New Zealand Couple to Name Child Superman,” *BBC News*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/6937327.stm>

further that discipline because their significance has more impact in other areas that relate to language.

According to Clankie, linguists have approached onomastics in the tradition of linguistic anthropology, with regard to the different taxonomies in different cultures, for example. Scholars tend to study taxonomies along the lines of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: that language influences the way people think and that different languages reflect different world views.<sup>86</sup> According to Clankie, however, we rarely interpret studies of taxonomies as studies of names.<sup>87</sup> Yet taxonomies are the ways people sort their world, that which is understood through a linguistic act of naming. Therefore taxonomies are one way that names are important to linguistics, specifically through linguistic-anthropology.

Onomastics, and particularly toponymy, has also contributed to historical linguistics. In many areas of the world, toponyms are the only evidence of extinct languages. Clankie then quotes Bender, saying that toponyms have aided linguistics in the reconstruction of proto-languages.<sup>88</sup> By looking at modern toponyms, we can trace the roots of languages, since toponyms have remained relatively constant while the languages around them changed. This type of historical linguistics is also connected to linguistic anthropology: how people (of the past) spoke, and understood their world.

Furthermore, since names are not arbitrary, they contribute uniquely to translation studies. Clankie writes that “proper names are rich in connotation,

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<sup>86</sup> Clankie, *A Theory of Genericization on Brand Name Change*, 47

<sup>87</sup> Clankie, *A Theory of Genericization on Brand Name Change*, 47

<sup>88</sup> Clankie, *A Theory of Genericization on Brand Name Change*, 48

even more so than common nouns.”<sup>89</sup> Because toponyms, for example, are not necessarily arbitrarily connected to the places that they reference, there are multiple ways that they can be translated, adding complications that do not exist with common nouns. In the literature on toponyms, we saw that names can be translated phonetically, semantically by morpheme, or semantically by the whole idea. The resulting translations indicate that sound patterns, word construction, or general ideas of places differ between languages.

Clankie concludes his section on the importance of names in linguistics by listing the specific linguistic areas in which onomastics should be incorporated: “in the branches of pragmatics (for how people choose to name things and the use of names), linguistic anthropology (for the classifications applied by individual cultures, and naming ceremonies), historical linguistics (for that names tell us about earlier forms of a language), semantics (for meanings attached to names), and so on.”<sup>90</sup> While Clankie mentions that generative grammarians may also be interested in names, in terms of phonology and morphology for instance, it is the fundamental issues in these other areas of linguistics such as translation and the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis where onomastics is vital to a full understanding of the theories. Clankie lists many ways in which names contribute to linguistics, yet admits that despite their importance, they have not been fully incorporated into the academic discipline.

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<sup>89</sup> Clankie, *A Theory of Genericization on Brand Name Change*, 49

<sup>90</sup> Clankie, *A Theory of Genericization on Brand Name Change*, 50-51

Since none of the disciplines mentioned above rely solely on words, we can separate names from words without separating them from language. For instance David Crystal argues against considering names as lexical items in his book *Words, Words, Words*. He says that because we would look up proper names in an encyclopedia rather than a dictionary, they do not count as words of whichever language is using them. He adds that no language owns proper names such as “Darth Vader” or “New Orleans” because names exist in all languages.<sup>91</sup> Yet, even though he may not count names when summing the lexical items in a language, these names must conform to the grammatical rules of the language in which they are uttered. They are not outside the realm of language. In fact, later in his book, Crystal discusses how closely place names specifically are tied to the language that uses them. For example, when places are named after people, this builds an intimate relationship between the people, the place, and the language.<sup>92</sup> This relationship merits a linguistic understanding of place names as pieces of language, despite his opinion that names are not words. He continues that “place names attract attitudes too, both negative and positive, usually on the basis of how they sound.”<sup>93</sup> For example, New Orleans allegedly attracted positive talk in Paris cafes because it sounded French. People’s attitudes are connected to the names, and how they are perceived in the language. Although Crystal begins saying that names are not regular lexical items, he concludes that “when we study words,

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<sup>91</sup> Crystal, *Words Words Words*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 12

<sup>92</sup> Crystal, *Words Words Words*, 76

<sup>93</sup> Crystal, *Words Words Words*, 76

we have to study names too, for everything influences everything.”<sup>94</sup> Names carry meaning. Although they are different from words, their meaning is a much a part of language as that of the everyday word.

In “The History of Onomastics,” Mihaly Hajdu traces the earliest scholarly references to names as a genre to be studied, to determine the place of names in the study of language. He mentions Dionysius Thrax who, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, first defined proper names separately from other nouns (as denoting one single being).<sup>95</sup> As his history moves towards the present day, Hajdu writes that scholars have tried to determine the place of proper names in language. He concludes that “proper nouns are embedded in the communication (sentence, text) as nouns, but, unlike common nouns, they do not convey thoughts. Their function is one of identification rather, so they are independent of the other parts of speech and constitute a special system beside them... consequently our grammars should also treat the means of communication (i.e., common nouns) and the means of identification (i.e., proper nouns) as separate units.”<sup>96</sup> According to Hajdu, proper names do belong in the language system and should be studied in this domain. While they are different from common nouns, they act alongside these other lexical items and should not be overlooked. He also mentions later in his essay that names, and especially place names, if studied more, could give us more insight into our language, specifically in the area of historical linguistics.

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<sup>94</sup> Crystal, *Words Words Words*, 77

<sup>95</sup> Hajdu, “The History of Onomastics,” <http://mnytud.arts.unideb.hu/nevtan>, 16

<sup>96</sup> Hajdu, “The History of Onomastics,” 21-22

In conclusion, onomastics is an interdisciplinary subject that “provide(s) a vast wealth of information about history, change, and meaning.”<sup>97</sup> Since all of these disciplines relate to language, and names themselves are a part of language, onomastics must have a place in linguistic studies. Scholars such as Clankie give possible areas where names could contribute to linguistics. In the next section I will propose a more specific placement of onomastics, and specifically toponymy, in linguistic studies.

#### b) Sociolinguistics vs Structural Linguistics

Within linguistic studies, sociolinguistics refers to language as it relates to the society that uses it. Toponyms belong in sociolinguistics. As the earlier discussion of onomastics and linguistics concluded, names are vital to the study of language, but do not fit easily into structural linguistics. Their significance is situated in society so they should be studied through language as it relates to society.

Structural linguistics focuses on language form, as opposed to language meaning. It analyzes how words form and combine to make sentences.<sup>98</sup> In his book *A Short History of Structural Linguistics*, Peter Matthews begins by comparing various dictionary definitions of structural linguistics. He concludes that “[structural linguistics] analyzes and describes the structures of language, as distinguished from its comparative or historical aspects.” Furthermore, structural linguistics is an analysis of language “on the

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<sup>97</sup> Clankie, *A Theory of Genericization on Brand Name Change*, 51

<sup>98</sup> Amy Stafford, “Structural Linguistics,”  
<http://www.mnsu.edu/emuseum/cultural/language/structling.html>

basis of its structure as reflected by irreducible units”<sup>99</sup> Structural linguistics looks at how language is built upon phonology, morphology, and syntax, the irreducible units of language. Phonology is the study of sound contrast in language. It incorporates phonetics, the physical properties of speech sounds. Morphology is the study of the internal structure of words. Syntax is the study of sentence structure. These disciplines analyze words, or lexical items, divorced from their meaning. Structural linguistics ignores language history, semantics, and comparative studies in order to generate a complete grammar of the structure, or form, of human language.

While names can be analyzed structurally as words, it is their semantics that defines them as a category distinct from just any lexical item. Grammatical analyses of words do not contribute to a fuller understanding of their complexities apart from words.

Let’s look structurally at two names:

#### 1. Syracuse

a. phonetic transcription: [sirIkyuz] (It needs to be compared to other words in the language for a phonological analysis.)

b. morphology: There isn’t any. It does not break down any further

c. syntax: When placed in a sentence, it functions as a noun.

Syracuse is a city. (subject)

I like Syracuse. (direct object)

I live in Syracuse. (object of a preposition).

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<sup>99</sup> Peter Matthews, *A Short History of Structural Linguistics*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 2

## 2. Harrisburg

a. phonetic transcription: [hærɪsbʔrg]

b. morphology: It breaks down into two morphemes. “Harris” is a person’s name. “Burg” is the German word for castle or fort, a defended place. So the name literally means “the castle of Harris.” It has no complicated grammatical morphemes such as past tense, or plural.

c. syntax: When placed in a sentence, it functions as a noun, similarly to “Syracuse” above.

Linguists can analyze names as if they were any other lexical item, more specifically, any noun. In this way, they are as vital to language as any other word in the lexicon. The example sentences above can be used to analyze the syntax of language, just as many other sentences can. For example, “I like Syracuse” would teach us the same rules of syntax as “I like cats” would. But the name “Syracuse” has more meaning behind it than the word “cat” because it includes all that we associate with the place. Through this deeper meaning, names also fit into language studies in a less structural and more semantic way. Because names are not arbitrary as words are, they have a richer meaning. The distinct semantics of names, their lack of arbitrariness and connection to the human experience, lends them to a different type of analysis. Therefore, their contribution to language studies relates more to their meanings for people than it does to structural linguistics.

An analysis of “Syracuse” or “Harrisburg” as names would ask questions unrelated to structure. For example: Was “Syracuse” already the

name of a person or place? Who named the city and what was their connection to this other “Syracuse?” From what language and people did we get the name “Syracuse?” Who was Harris and what was his connection to the city? Was there ever a castle there? Was the city built as a defense, like a fort? Were the founders German? We would not be able to ask these questions about “cats” because it is an arbitrary word. Names, however, are not arbitrary and consequently raise different types of questions related to meaning and language. These questions connect language to the society using the language.

Sociolinguistics looks at language beyond an ideal grammatical world to understand how it interacts with the societies that use it. Language is not just an abstract object of study, but rather, it is a tool that people use in groups. Sociolinguists analyze how social structures influence linguistic structure and how linguistic structure influences social structures. By taking the words and sentences out of an ideal context, we can understand how social variables give them new meanings, meanings that generally go beyond grammatical structure. Sociolinguistics views language as a communication system used by groups of people. Sociolinguists typically match linguistic variation to social variables (variables that differentiate groups of people from one another) such as race, ethnicity, class, age, gender, and geographic location. Other societal differences such as types of societal bilingualism and whether the language being analyzed is the person’s native language are also of particular interest to sociolinguists. Rather than try to construct a grammar of a language based on form, in studies that include social variables, scholars

want to understand how meanings change: how communication succeeds or breaks down based on the connection of language and groups of people.

Names belong in sociolinguistics because the study of names is an inquiry into semantics, not grammatical form. As we saw with the example of “Nouvelle Orleans,” a name can be grammatically ambiguous, but evoke strong feelings within people. When I ask what the name New Orleans means, I am not wondering how it is constructed as a word or how it fits into a sentence. Rather, I am asking how you feel about it as a person, as a resident of that city, or that country, as a poor person or a rich person. I am asking what images come to mind and why. Names are significant apart from words because of why we chose names and why we care about them. Because the “we” is important in an analysis of names, names belong in sociolinguistics rather than structural linguistics.

### c) A Geographic Understanding of Sociolinguistics

To study sociolinguistics means to study how language and human society are connected. Names are a manifestation of this connection. With names, we have control over our language: we are free to refer to someone or some place with the term of our choosing. We are free to create the connections between the item we are naming and its namesake. We choose names because of their literal meaning, or the meaning society has given them through associations. These associations belong to sociolinguistics (in my new understanding of the discipline): it is society interacting with language.

We can more concretely understand the concept of naming as the essence of sociolinguistics through toponymy. Naming places is a way to control society through language. For example, because the name “Nouvelle Orléans” implied a regal, European city that is in part how the early French settlers there defined themselves. The original names in the area, such as Bayou Choupik, gave an impression of a more primitive society with which the French settlers did not want to be associated. Bayou St. John instead brought religion to their settlement through language. Places are a vital part of human life. The French explorers who founded New Orleans knew that the names of the places would become central to the community in that area: they would be mentioned daily, be written on addresses, and become part of a society’s identity. Therefore the language used to reference these places needed to reflect what they considered the desirable image of their society: regal and religious European settlements, not wallowing mudfish.

Furthermore, as the society established itself under that toponym and distanced itself from the founders’ images, “New Orleans” became opaque, but also took on new meanings from the people and the place where they lived. It symbolized the physical aspects such as the Mississippi River, and the character of the community including Mardi Gras and jazz. Because of these connections, the city cannot just be picked up and moved elsewhere. It would not be “New Orleans” elsewhere because “New Orleans” is too entrenched in the history of a specific community in a specific place. A name is the part of the language most closely connected to a society. Words are arbitrary and

therefore, they can change without too much upheaval, but a toponym cannot be relocated. It is nothing when divorced from the society that uses it. A name is society and language embedded in society. *A name is sociolinguistic.*

Thus it is within sociolinguistics that toponyms, and onomastics as a whole, can find a niche in linguistics. While they do not lend themselves to traditional sociolinguistic studies, I propose that from a different angle names can be interpreted as the essence of sociolinguistics. Through place and toponyms we can understand how names link society and language. It is through their meaning then, rather than their form, that names are important. Names can and should be studied as linguistics, through sociolinguistics: the combination of language and society that makes individuals care passionately about names.

## VI. Conclusion

The study of language typically analyzes words, the sounds that constitute them, and the utterances they form. A name is more than a word because its form has meaning, whereas that of a word is arbitrary. Yet this meaning complicates names, establishing an interdisciplinary field that is not easily fitted into linguistics. Studies of names, specifically toponyms, are studies of human societies: how a name is connected to a people, how a people understand a name, and how a name can be manipulated for a society's goals. To understand an inquiry into the meaning of a toponym as a linguistic inquiry requires redefining sociolinguistics. Toponyms are sociolinguistic, and

therefore have a place in linguistics, in that through place, they link language and peoples.

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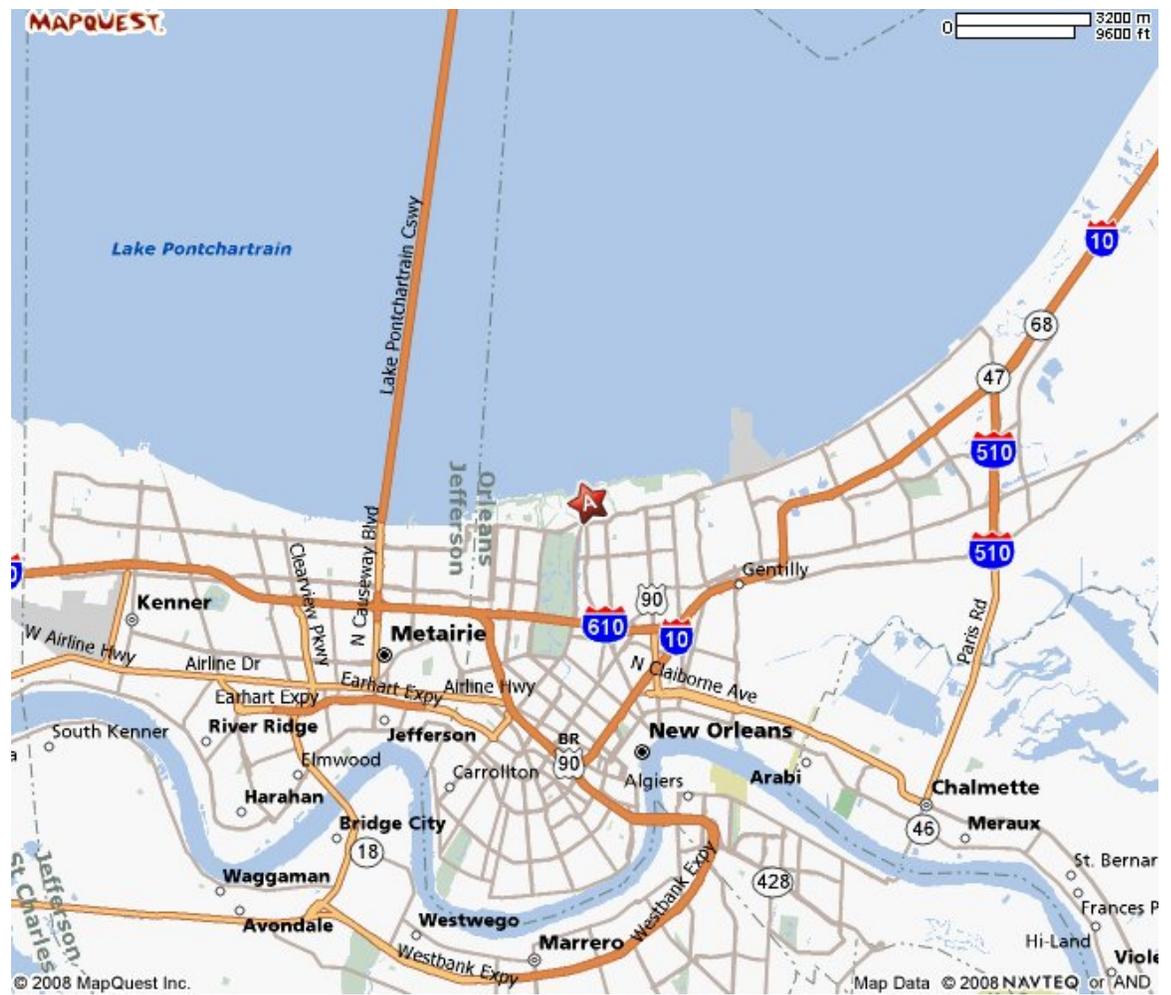
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## Appendix



A map of New Orleans, LA, located on Lake Pontchartrain in the bend of the Mississippi River. The star marks Bayou St. John.

## Written Capstone Summary

A name is like a word. For example, I can say, “I like Syracuse” or “I like cats” because both “Syracuse” and “cats” are words. From a grammatical standpoint, it does not matter that one word is the name of a city and the other word refers to an animal; either way, it is a correct English sentence. Yet while words are central to the field of linguistics, the scientific study of language, names remain on the periphery. Although names function grammatically as words do, they also have a type of meaning that differs from that of ordinary words. This fact has historically excluded them from linguistic analyses. Through an analysis of toponyms, or names of places, I attempt to understand how a name differs from a word and to determine how names can be incorporated into the discipline of linguistics despite that difference.

I first explain the most basic difference between a name and a word. In linguistics a word is traditionally understood to be an arbitrary pairing of form and meaning. A word’s form is the sum of a number of sounds. For example, the form “cats” is the combination of k + a + t + s. The form of this word is a combination of four separate sounds that humans produce. The meaning of the word “cats” is a bunch of little furry animals that chase mice and are kept as pets. The form and the meaning, however, are paired arbitrarily. That is to say that there is no reason why the form “bed” couldn’t mean a bunch of little furry animals. Although every form, or combination of sounds, refers to a real world item (or idea), there is nothing inherent in that form that requires it to

refer to any certain item instead of any other item. Thus, words are arbitrary. In contrast, names are not arbitrary. People bestow names based on how they sound or what they have already come to represent. We deliberate over what to call a child or a city because we want the name to fit. We put thought into the names we choose, wanting the form to associate the object it represents with particular connotations.

The first section of my paper concludes with a discussion of Opacity Theory, a theory about words that relates to the meaning of names. An expression, or name, becomes opaque when we can no longer see through its form to understand its meaning. For example, the term “pitch black” comes from the metaphor “as black as pitch.” Now, however, we use “pitch” as an intensifier similar to “very.” It can be heard in the context “pitch white,” meaning “very white.” The term pitch has become opaque. Similarly to the term “pitch black,” names are given as metaphors. The city names such as “Syracuse,” “Rome,” and “Utica” in Upstate New York were bestowed to associate these new cities with their ancient European counterparts of the same name. Now, however, we more readily associate “Syracuse” with a university and a basketball team. The name has become opaque, divorced from its original meaning. It has instead picked up new meanings based on the community it presently references. Rather than arbitrarily, names are bestowed to evoke certain meanings. Over time these meanings get lost and the consequently opaque name takes on new meanings. These are the two

main theoretical differences between words and names that I build on throughout the paper.

The second section of the paper summarizes various ways that scholars have analyzed names, specifically toponyms. The fact that such literature exists strongly indicates that names have significance worth studying. The cross-disciplinary nature of this literature emphasizes that the common thread in the meaning of names is their connection to the human experience, that which can be understood from a variety of disciplinary angles.

Philosophical literature asks to what a name actually refers. For example, if we were to relocate a city to a different physical location on the globe, would that city keep its old name in its new location, or is the name tied to the original location? The literature concludes that the name moves with the city because city names refer to humanly constructed entities rather than geographic points on the globe.

Anthropological literature questions how toponyms function as integral parts of specific cultures. For example, when the Western Apache (Native Americans) mention a toponym, the name means an entire story that can teach a lesson to the listener. Furthermore, we cannot easily translate place names because of their embedded cultural meaning. When the English colonized Ireland, for example, they tried to change the toponyms, which angered the Irish people because the toponyms represented the stories of the people who had inhabited the places. Beyond simply referencing a place, toponyms relate the history of communities.

Finally, political literature looks at how governments have changed toponyms to further their own political aims: to build community or break down enemies. The Israeli government, for example, renamed places after biblical figures and Zionist leaders to create solidarity within the new Jewish nation. The government chose these names to support a political agenda. Toponyms can be a powerful political tool simply because a community cares passionately about them.

Through my inquiry into toponymic literature, I determined that not only have scholars addressed names, but they address them through a variety of disciplines with a common link: a name's significance is connected to a society. Linguistic studies that frequently address language in the abstract, detached from those who use it, do not differentiate between names and words. In order to find meaning in toponyms outside of their nature as an element of language similar to a word, scholars have studied them through the lenses of other disciplines. These disciplines link toponyms to the human experience.

I follow the section of literature review with a case study of a specific toponym that exemplifies many of the themes that surfaced in the toponymic literature. In Southern Louisiana, at a bend in the Mississippi River, is a city called "New Orleans." The founders of New Orleans named it after a French Duke in order to evoke an image of European grandeur for the new city. These settlers also changed Native American names in the area, which they felt did not represent adequate elegance. For example, Bayou Choupik, named

after a variety of mudfish, became Bayou St. Jean (Bayou St. John) named for a saint. Therefore far from an arbitrary pairing of form and meaning, New Orleans (along with settlements in the area) was named because the form already denoted an image that the founders wanted to connect with their city.

When the city became American almost a century after its founding, the name was directly translated from “Nouvelle Orléans,” the original French name, to “New Orleans,” which began a new era for the meaning of the name. As the city became more Americanized, the name became opaque and subsequently took on a myriad of other meanings relating to the people and the culture of the place.

Today “New Orleans” means the death and disaster associated with Hurricane Katrina. Before the hurricane struck, “New Orleans” meant Mardi Gras, jazz, Cajun culture, and the Mississippi River. These images of “New Orleans” come from the community that the name represents. Furthermore, we cannot hear the name without some thought of these associations. We connect “New Orleans” with these images because the name is more than just an arbitrary form, or one that has become opaque. Rather, a name gains meaning from the society that uses it.

In addition to these political and anthropological dimensions, “New Orleans” provides a window into the philosophical questions of toponyms. Following Hurricane Katrina, the government debated relocating New Orleans. Newspaper editorials at the time, however, were overwhelmingly against the idea because the meaning of “New Orleans” was too closely

connected to a society based on its location on the Mississippi River. Rather than determine, as some scholars have assumed, that the name would transfer to the relocated place because it was the culture of the place that was actually moving, in this genuine example the name is too closely tied to a society formed around a relationship with its physical location. Nevertheless, the example of “New Orleans” demonstrates many of the aspects of naming that surfaced in the literature. It exemplifies concretely that names, far from being arbitrary, reflect the experience of the people who use them.

The types of toponymic significance in the literature, supported by the case study, lead me to the final section of the paper where I situate names in linguistics. Because the significance of names is in the society that uses them, I argue that linguistics can incorporate names through the sub-discipline of *sociolinguistics*. Yet linguistics has historically avoided the study of names because names add nothing to the genera of structural linguistics beyond their function as words. That is to say, names and words are both made of certain sounds units and both function similarly in sentences. Therefore names cannot help linguists better understand the structure of human language. In earlier sections of this paper, however, I determined that names do in fact have a meaning in relation to society that words lack, beginning with their non-arbitrariness, and continuing into the associations they pick up over time. While this meaning does not contribute to an understanding of the structure of language, it does contribute to an understanding of language, so there needs to be a place in linguistics for names.

Sociolinguistics is the study of language *as it functions in society*.

Sociolinguists generally correlate social variables with linguistic variables. For example, the lack of the “r” in the speech of some Americans can be a function of their geographic location, ethnicity, social class, age, or gender, among other variables. Sociolinguists explain variation in language by correlating linguistic variations (such as a lack of “r”) to social categories. According to this typical understanding of sociolinguistics, names are still just words in which linguistic variables can occur. Since this is the realm that connects language to society, however, I believe that the discipline can be broadened to incorporate names in a meaningful way.

Names are language and society intertwined. Their meaning comes from how they connect these two areas. Names therefore constitute a different type of sociolinguistics, where we see how society gives words meaning beyond their function as referents, and where language gives society an image of itself. We choose toponyms because of the connotations they will give a society. We refuse to rename places because the names reflect the stories and the life of the community. Whereas a word is arbitrary, a name takes meaning from the people that use it. Thus names connect society and language. Names are sociolinguistic. This Capstone Project looks at an element of language that has been sidelined by linguistics, and through the use of other disciplines, finds a way to study it as language.