

Common nouns and saliency in toponyms: A comparative study

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Toponyms display properties hinting at the existence of a “toponymic grammar” (Stolz et al. 2017) that includes rules for synthetic toponyms vs. analytic toponyms. Synthetic toponyms (e.g. London) lack clear morphological boundaries, follow distinctive stress patterns, and act as opaque “places” designators (Köhnlein 2015). Analytic toponyms involve appellative constructions including common nouns or other categories (e.g. Greater London: Anderson 2007: Ch. 4). There seems to be a relation between the increasing morphological complexity of these constructions, and the decreasing cultural saliency of the places they refer to (Van Langendonck 2007: Ch. 4). However, the cross-linguistic role of this relation is still understudied.

Our first goal is to present data involving toponyms from four languages of increasing morphological complexity: English, Mandarin, Italian and Finnish. We focus on toponyms for urban districts (e.g. North Sydney), water bodies (Lake Tahoe) and mountains (Tara Mountains: Nübling et al. 2015). The structures of these toponyms involve a specific term, acting as an opaque label referring to a salient place, and one or more generic terms describing the place type (Blair & Tent 2015). Three further properties seem understudied. First, the inventory of categories acting as generics, beyond common nouns, is still partially uncharted (Schlücker & Ackermann 2017). Second, the semantic contribution of common nouns and related categories is also poorly understood (Blair & Tent 2015). Third, these toponyms seem to emerge according to weakly productive rules of formation (Köhnlein 2015)

The second goal of this talk is to offer a unified theoretical account of these properties. We first discuss the types of attested generic markers and their orders, and the distribution of these place names in Basic locative Constructions (Levinson & Wilkins 2006: Ch. 1). We then propose a compositionally-oriented semantic analysis (cf. Schlücker & Ackermann 2017: 318–320; on proper names). We conclude by discussing how these findings shed light on the properties of toponymic grammars of these languages.

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