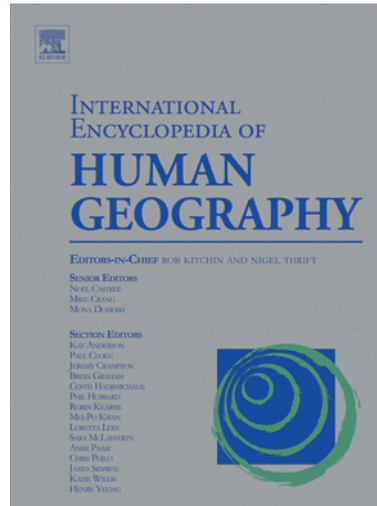


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Language and Research

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Glossary

Deconstruction It is associated with the post-structuralist, Jacques Derrida, and represents a technique to reveal the inherent instabilities and uncertainties of language.

Discourse A network of concepts, statements, and practices that collectively produce and authenticate particular knowledges and truths.

Hermeneutics The study and clarification of meaning wherever it is located.

Metaphor The transference of characteristics of one object to another, for example, waves in an ocean are like pulses of light.

Naïve Realism The idea that words are perfect representations of the world that they describe.

Narrative A particular kind of story in which its different elements are integrated, and through their integration become understandable one to another as well as to the whole.

Postmodernism A critical movement concerned to unseat the certainties of modernism by celebrating heterogeneity, openness, and novel forms of representation, including those found in language.

Post-Structuralism A post-World War II intellectual movement associated especially with a group of French intellectuals, one of whose concerns is with the unstable nature of language and its role in shaping subjectivity and identity.

Rhetoric The study of persuasive discourse: how words and expressions “influence men’s souls” as Plato put it.

Text A cultural meaningful practice that can be interpreted and understood: from words to landscapes.

unassailable and essentially correct ways. Under this view, using language becomes simply the mechanical one of lining up words in the right order. All we need to know about a language is its vocabulary and rules of grammar. After that, it is like laying pipe, or electrical wire, “manual labor of the mind,” as the novelist John Gregory Dunne once expressed it.

For much of the history of human geography, the disciplinary inclination has been either like Mrs. Jourdain to avoid thinking about language, or to assert some form of naïve realism. Admittedly, there exists a long-standing cottage industry, especially within American cultural geography, concerned with the categorization and mapping of languages and dialects, but even here naïve realism holds. Practitioners believe that language is like a material object, such as a barn or fence post, and its importance lies only in its physical geographical distribution.

Such a view has begun to change over the last 30 years, however. Starting in the late 1970s with political economy and humanistic geography, and from the 1990s with postmodernism and post-structuralism, there has been increasing recognition of the utter centrality and complexity of language. Rather than simply reflecting the world, or our thoughts, language is riddled with social power, cultural norms, political imperatives, duplicity, and *non sequiturs*. As a topic, language is potentially as large as the discipline itself. Here, however, we confine ourselves to only four issues: a brief intellectual history of geographers’ engagement with language; a discussion of various critical strategies used to reveal how language operates in geographical works; a review of substantive geographical studies of place, landscape, and language, frequently linked to issues of social power and identity; and finally, and perhaps the heir to those earlier cultural geography studies of the spatial distribution of languages, an assessment of the increasing hegemony of the English language as the *de facto lingua franca* of the discipline.

Introduction

Language is inescapable. To think about the meaning of language is already to use it. Furthermore, like Molière’s Mrs. Jourdain who spoke prose all his life without knowing it, we use language all of our life, yet for the most part are unconscious of its operation. If we think about language at all, it is likely as a neutral and transparent medium, a convenient means to connect the outside world of reality to the inside world of our mind. This larger view is known as naïve realism: the belief that pieces of language adhere to thoughts and objects in

Geographers and Language: A Brief History

In many ways, naïve realism was made for geography. From its institutionalization in the late nineteenth century, human geography was defined as descriptive, not explanatory, concerned with the concrete, and the particular, not the abstract and the general. Consequently, the naïve realist view accorded perfectly with the practices of geographers as they named, sorted, classified, and

shuffled around bits of the world on pieces of paper. The culmination was American regional geography, and given justification by Richard Hartshorne in his tome *The Nature of Geography*. The discipline was defined there as a descriptive science of unique regions, and facilitated by a transparent language that could reflect without bias or distortion the exceptional character of the world.

Even though regional geography gave way sometime in the late 1950s to a scientific approach, 'spatial science', stressing explanation, abstraction, and generality, some version of naïve realism remained. Useful here is the distinction between natural and formal languages. Natural languages are organic and of the everyday, whereas formal languages are purposively designed for specialized ends. The quantitative revolution represented the replacement of an 'imprecise' natural language (hitherto used for describing unique geographical facts) by a more rigorous and exact formal language (used for general spatial explanation). Despite this, geographers still adhered to naïve realism. Language, albeit now as equations, numbers, and statistical formulae, mirrored reality. Indeed, the degree of correspondence could be scientifically proven to one significant decimal place or another.

The first signs of real change that geography might be ripe for a 'linguistic turn', which took language seriously, began in the 1970s, and associated with the introduction to the discipline of both political economy and a humanistic approach. Political economy emphasized the political nature of language – its power-sodden character. Drawing upon Marx, David Harvey in *Social Justice and the City* argued that language, including the language of geography's quantitative revolution, was ideological – a smoke screen of words and symbols that obfuscated truth rather than revealing it. Harvey labeled such language 'counter-revolutionary', contending that its purpose was only to forward the interests of a small elite at the expense of a large, powerless proletariat. For Harvey, language was not transparent but opaque, not innocent but culpable, skewed to meet the ends of only those with power. Only after the Revolution could language be redeemed.

In contrast, humanistic geography stressed less the issues of power and concealment than the fraught nature of establishing meaning within language. Drawing in particular on the German hermeneutic tradition, and rooting their substantive studies in ordinary places and landscapes, humanistic geographers in the important book *Humanistic Geography* edited by David Ley and Marwyn Samuels argued that interpretation was never straightforward; it was never merely reading labels stuck on the back of things. It was hard work, and, in the end, there was no end, and no final knock-down interpretation. Words could always be otherwise, but there was no alternative. Language was the only game in town, and its

perversity was what we were stuck with and stuck to. Moreover, unlike in Harvey's account, for humanistic geographers, there would never be redemption. Language was always wedged in an awkward corner, and we with it.

Gunnar Olsson drew brilliantly upon both political-economic and humanistic positions to write geography's first book-length treatment about the problems of language, *Birds in Egg*. Initially, an acolyte of the quantitative revolution, within a decade, however, Olsson was arguing that spatial science said less about the world it wrote about than the language it was written in. Like the humanistic geographers, Olsson thought we had no choice but "to bump our heads against the ceiling of language," but like the Marxists he thought that the resulting pain was distributed unevenly, favoring the powerful. His larger point: the language of geographers is neither naïve nor realist. Language is used strategically less to represent worlds than to make them, and in some cases to make them unjust.

Olsson's work was an important segue to post-modernism and post-structuralism, which made language central during the 'linguistic turn' that followed during the 1990s. As well as Ludwig Wittgenstein and Martin Heidegger, on whom Olsson had drawn, other key writers drawn into this later discussion by geographers included Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Jean Beaudrillard. Also on the margins of this work was the acknowledgment of a reinvigorated American pragmatism championed by Richard Rorty. While there were enormous differences among the positions of these various figures, there was agreement that language went all the way down. It was all that we have. For geographers, this resulted in an acute interest in how language worked, and its effects. Furthermore, to understand better the role of language, geographers began deploying techniques and methods from literary theory, such as discourse analysis and deconstruction. Such an interest was often combined with substantive studies concerned with showing how language operated in constructing especially place and landscape. In the process, geographers also pushed the limits of what counted as language, and thus what could be analyzed. There were written words, of course, but increasingly included were quite different texts such as equations and numbers, maps and atlases, and even architecture and building types. All were grist for the postmodern and post-structural mill of analysis, interpretation, and scrutiny.

Methods and Techniques of Language Analysis

To understand how language operates, geographers have drawn upon a variety of literary and philosophical

analyses. Four have been especially pertinent: rhetoric, metaphor, discourse, and deconstruction.

Rhetoric

Rhetoric is about understanding how words can be used persuasively. For the 'truth' of an argument does not necessarily win the day. It is the persuasive power of the language in which that truth is expressed that is critical. Specifically, under rhetoric, tropes such as metaphors, ironic asides, equations, jokes, citations, and anecdotes are the bases of authority and argument. This is in marked contrast to the belief of epistemology that avers, truth is established on the basis of a set of *a priori*, abstract criteria. For rhetoricians, however, truth emerges within only specific practices of persuasion on the ground, in discourse, and in conversation.

References to rhetoric by geographers have often been implicit (although explicit analyses do exist). Rhetoric was originally deployed within an offshoot of humanistic geography, the geography of literature, and concerned with how creative writers manipulate language to invoke the *genius loci* of a particular place or region. With much more of an edge has been work on how rhetoric has been used by geographers in their own writing to bolster arguments for maintaining the *status quo* or mounting intellectual change. Peter Taylor, for example, provided a compelling argument that the quantitative revolution in geography was successful because of its proponents' superior rhetoric and couched as a formal language (a theme taken up in a debate in 1994 between Trevor Barnes and Keith Bassett in *Environment and Planning A*).

Metaphor

Metaphor is one of the key elements of rhetoric. Arguments are persuasive when they are couched like an argument that has already been made in a different context. This is what metaphors do. They draw similarities between different contexts. The classic example is Isaac Newton's invocation of waves – hitherto reserved for describing and explaining liquids – to describe and explain quite a different context: light. Newton's larger strategy of likening one explanatory context to another is called 'metaphorical redescription'. Through metaphorical redescription, scientists and social scientists establish large (meta) frameworks of explanation that understands one class of phenomena in terms of the understanding of quite a different class of phenomena.

As an intellectual practice, metaphorical redescription is pervasive both in the sciences and social sciences. In the late nineteenth century, economists, for example, borrowed theories of physics to describe and explain the behavior of economic agents in rational choice theory. In geography, metaphorical redescription is found in

theories of spatial interaction that likens it to gravity; in urban geography that, following the Chicago School, likens cities to plant biomes; and in industrial geography that likens economic regions to geological strata.

A problem with metaphorical redescription, however, are hidden assumptions frequently conveyed within the metaphor: postulates that might make sense in the original context, but are inappropriate in its new use. Consequently, some geographers have begun to 'exhume' geography's 'dead metaphors', inspecting them critically for their coherence, consistency, and compatibility in their new setting. Doing so often means scrutinizing the historical and material origins of the original metaphor that shaped its meaning. In this sense, taking metaphor seriously means "worlding them" as Neil Smith and Cindi Katz term it.

Discourse

The concept of 'discourse' further develops the analysis of language, especially its ability to create new truths and new worlds. Discourses are frameworks for understanding and directing different domains of social action. They are composed not only of specific vocabularies and rhetorical techniques, but also modes of thinking, grammars, rationalities, and even specific material practices that represent, interpret, and create new bits of reality. Although found in the structuralist works of Claude Levi-Strauss, much contemporary discourse theory is based on the work of Michel Foucault that explicitly links power and language.

Foucault argues that by establishing criteria by which truth is judged, discourse is the primary channel through which power flows within societies, social groups, and academic disciplines. Power, communicated through discourse, facilitates certain modes of acting and thinking, while limiting others. Moreover, discourse functions at the level of taken-for-granted presuppositions about reality. As a result, discourses produce a reality by establishing what an individual can think, say, or do. In his work on criminality, insanity, and sexuality, for example, Foucault argued that discourses are not simply reflections, representations, of social phenomena, but define them, thus giving them a reality. Further, those discourses are held in place and given force by specific social institutions and practices of everyday life, as well as the physical sites (prisons, hospitals, and asylums) that embody them. As a vehicle for power, discourse is thus internalized by social actors, and supporting Foucault's contention that power is diffused across a multitude of self-policing social actors, rather than exercised by a sovereign center.

Discourse analysis has been taken up across human geography, from political and economic geography to social, cultural, and environmental geography. It is

possibly the most popular method of social analysis found within human geography. In every case, whatever the specific context, geographers are concerned to identify the constituents of the discourse, their origin, and most importantly their effects. The popularity of discourse as a critical concept, and the 'linguistic turn' more generally, has been criticized for sidelining the study of concrete problems on the one hand, and the continued role of capital and class in structuring power relationships on the other.

Deconstruction

Deconstruction is an approach to critical analysis developed from the writings of Jacques Derrida. Based on the Foucauldian argument that discourses are everywhere, deconstruction aims to destabilize them by a form of literary close reading that highlights their contradictions, exceptions, and *aporias*. Always attempting to find within a given discourse the means for its own critique, deconstruction pays close attention to the tensions between a discourse's stated meaning and the rhetorical techniques (underlying metaphorical assumptions, footnotes, and forms of argumentation) used to convey it. Deconstruction thus aims to reveal a text's multiple and contradictory meanings rather than searching for a stable and unitary meaning that corresponds to a truth or reality outside of language. Denying the possibility of this type of transcendental signification, deconstruction is based on a Saussurian conception of language as a 'system of differences' where, without a fixed center or truth to tether it, meaning can be made and remade through the infinite substitutions of 'freeplay'. In this way, deconstruction also challenges and destabilizes the relationship between power and knowledge established by Foucault.

There have been few sustained, focused studies making use of deconstruction in human geography in part because of the difficulty of such a task. Much more common is the invocation of deconstruction to identify contradictions within a given analysis, or a historical body of work and theory as in Derek Gregory's *Geographical Imaginations*. Sometimes, the word is used even more loosely by geographers simply to mean critique. Criticisms of deconstruction have focused on its perceived nihilistic rejection of rationalism and truth, and in geography at least often made by those within political economy.

Place, Landscape, and Language

In addition to these methodological reflections on language by geographers, there is also keen interest in the role language plays in constructing real places and landscapes, and, in turn, about how those processes are bound up with social power and identity.

Even early in the discipline's history, issues of language were important in describing place and landscape. For example, the British geographer A. J. Herbertson (1865–1915) and the French geographer Vidal de la Blache (1845–1918) both believed that there was an art to describing both. Words needed to be crafted, not mechanically bolted. Representing a place's *genius loci* in Herbertson's case, or a region's 'personality' in Vidal's, required delicacy, a deft writing hand.

Later work carried out from the early 1980s from both political-economic and humanistic-geographical traditions, however, was less concerned with the problems of using language to represent place and landscape than drawing upon literary theorists to understand how place and landscape were like a language – a text – that could be critically analyzed. Denis Cosgrove's *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* drew especially on Raymond Williams' Marxist literary theory to argue that social formations produced particular kinds of landscape. Williams had used the idea of a social formation to understand in his case the changing symbolic character of literature. Cosgrove did the same, except he was interested in the changing symbolic (later dubbed 'iconographic') form of the landscape. For example, the Italian Palladian landscape, or the landscape of English country houses, were symbols of an underlying social order based on private property and an associated inequitable distribution of power and resources. It was therefore necessary 'to read' the landscape, to decrypt its symbolic form, and grasp the social relations of power that lay beneath.

Treating the landscape as a text to be read also emerged from the humanistic perspective and which later melded into post-structuralism and postmodernism (Roland Barthes was especially influential). In this work, though, there was no deep social formation that the text reflected. Instead, the text of landscape was a cultural and political product that emerged recursively from the specific context in which it was embedded, and which varied geographically and historically. That context might be late-twentieth-century inner-city landscapes of Vancouver and two competing political visions, liberalism and conservatism, or the nineteenth-century city of Kandy, Sri Lanka, and the dominance of a non-negotiable religious order. As before, though, the point is to treat the landscape as a form of language. Consequently, its symbolism is readable through the prism of its larger context.

In addition to these studies of landscape, there have also been attempts to understand place in terms of meaning and language. Yi-Fu Tuan's writing on *Topophilia*, and Edward Relph's book on *Place and Placelessness*, are both about how places achieve, or not, significance and import. In addition, Nicholas Entrikin in *The Betweenness of Place* explicitly draws upon the idea of

literary narrative to make sense of place. For him, places are forms of 'emplotment', that is, narratives or stories that possess coherence such that one is able to make sense of how their individual elements are connected and joined. Place is not a haphazard collection of items, but holds together like an integrated story. Places are narratives to be told, and require to be analyzed as such.

Apart from attempts to analyze place and landscape as if they were a language, how people within a place and landscape actually use language has also attracted critical attention. Here language is treated as one of the interesting constituent components forming place and landscape. Linguistic practices here act as a map of social divisions, structures of power, and forms of resistance situated within particular places. In his sociolinguistic geographies, Allan Pred, for example, shows how words both construct and reflect identities, occupations, and struggles that characterized the lives of particular people in particular places. Tracing changes in the lexicon of Stockholm's working class as they dealt with economic modernization, or the way in which language is implicated in the racist practices of modern-day Sweden, he argues that linguistic practice is central to the processes, institutions, and forms of consciousness that socialize place. Words and worlds are intimately linked.

Other works in this vein have shown how linguistic practices act within particular places and landscapes to create exclusion and intolerance. They have focused especially on gender, urban ethnolinguistic divisions, and racialized aspects of the cultural separation between rural and urban space. Politically, language is also deeply implicated in an individual's or community's ability to claim citizenship, exercise rights, and participate in civil institutions. Reactions to these experiences of exclusion have led geographers to consider the formation of alternate, nonstate-based, forms of political commitment and belonging, and operating across a variety of scales. Finally, there has been work on the way in which toponyms, that is, place names, reflect the interaction between culture, power, and place. Much attention has been given to changes in place names – whether in the nineteenth-century Scotland, the West Bank, or in Latin America – and how it is bound up with power struggles over the control of place, meaning, and identity. Efforts to address these legacies by recovering and reinstating past place names have led geographers to consider the difficult questions around writing plural identities onto landscape.

The Language of Geography: English as *lingua franca*

A final issue is the power-laden and non-neutral nature of language as it functions within the discipline. Specifically, there is a debate around the use of English as the

discipline's *lingua franca*. At issue is the argument that the use of English within geography is not simply a neutral, convenient medium of communication. Rather, it is bound up with a specific worldview establishing fluency-based geometries of power. That is, English as geography's *lingua franca* produces particular perceptions and depictions of the world, and our relationship to others, which would be different if another language was used.

The use of English as a spatializing practice has drawn the most criticism. While creating dominant spaces of communication centered in the English-speaking world, the prevailing use of English also regulates academic practice beyond it through a deterritorialized and quasi-universal system of norms and conventions. Specifically, within the English-speaking community, a conflation is made between 'English' and 'international'. Such a conflation, however, obscures the fact that access to the 'international' is in fact controlled by a small number of journals dominated by and published in the English-speaking world. Such an iniquity is further reinforced by key pieces in the structures of professional academia such as the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), where non-English speaking countries supply only between 5.1% and 7.4% of journal contributions.

The linguistic homogenization of the Anglo-centric sphere of international academia also encourages an unwarranted conflation between English fluency and academic quality and legitimacy. In turn, this marginalizes the work of non-English academics, and reduces their ability to shape agendas of publications and conferences. Yet, another consequence of human geography's ironic blindness to its own place-based character is the promotion of a specific vision of academia, and a culturally specific set of epistemological concepts and areas of research. Consequently, the language and supporting academic institutions couched within the vocabularies of Anglo-American social science are then presumed to be universally applicable. Terms like 'multiculturalism', 'immigrant', or 'postmodernism' circulate with and deploy specifically situated visions of what they describe, but take on the appearance of universality, thanks to the wide use afforded to them by the broad circulation of the English language.

Linguistic hegemony, and its associated disciplining practices of the kind we described, imagines and attempts to inscribe center–margin relationships between actors and locations, in this case, between an English Anglo-America and a non-English rest of the world. Such a model, however, has recently been called into question by issues of reception, resistance, and cultural significance, and which have shaped debates on cultural globalization more generally. Additionally, the core–periphery model has been troubled by the conscious adoption of English as a *lingua franca* by non-native speakers, and used by them

'subversively' to bridge multiple linguistic groups and to facilitate participation in broader economic, political, cultural, and academic spheres.

Within this context, Claudio Minca argues that whether English operates as a tool of power or a bridge between diverse speakers is a question of volition. It is not the language itself but the contexts of power within which it is spoken that marginalize and homogenize. What is needed, he suggests, is the willingness to decontextualize and recontextualize knowledge and openness to sources of legitimacy outside the Anglo-American tradition.

Conclusion

Much has changed since the naïve realist views of language that characterized geography's early engagements with language. As a consequence of the utilization of a variety of critical perspectives, human geographers no longer view language as a neutral vehicle, or simply verbal labels that adhere to the objects they designate. There is nothing simple about language or meaning. It is a vehicle for social power, a tool of persuasion, a means for representing, and producing particular realities, and central to a panoply of social institutions and practices that create space, place, and landscape. From these critical perspectives, and familiarity with the instruments of linguistic and textual analysis, geographers have understood the symbolic content of space, place, and landscape, and the social and political process that have shaped them. Language has been brought into geography, and, in turn, it has helped to illuminate the linguistic character of the geographical.

See also: Deconstruction; Discourse; Humanism/Humanistic Geography; Ideology; Landscape; Postmodernism/Postmodern Geography; Poststructuralism/Poststructuralist Geographies.

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