

Terrain, Topography, Landscape, and Place

The interplay of language, culture, and environment

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Notions of place are culturally constructed and intersubjective and are attached to features of the physical world. However, places are not constructs simply put into the world. The environmental features to which places are attached are themselves not objective. An objective physical world exists, outside and independent of the human mind, but we can't know it directly. Instead, the mind constructs a conceptual representation of the physical world, informed by perception. It is features of that conceptual representation of the world to which notions of place are attached.

As a conceptual construct, that world – landscape (as opposed to terrain or even topography) and the features in it – are therefore shaped by social and cultural interpretation. Not surprisingly, this gives rise to diversity in human spatial and platial behaviour. This diversity is perhaps most visible in spatial language, and this talk presents examples of diversity in the expression of landscape and of spatial relationships. Competing perspectives exist on the relationship between language, humans, and the environment. One end of the spectrum argues that it is simply diversity in the environment itself that shapes diversity in human behaviour and language. At the other end of the spectrum, neo-Whorfian approaches of linguistic relativity posit that largely arbitrary linguistic representations shape conceptual structure.

However, language does not directly shape the world, and the world does not directly shape linguistic expressions of space and place – they are mediated, and neither plays a deterministic role. The sociotopographic model attempts to account for the relationships between topography, culture, and language. The relationships between the components of the model are bidirectional. The raw world shapes the cultures of the humans who inhabit it, through their individual experiences of interaction with their environment. The cultural practices and beliefs of those humans in turn shape the world, literally through the built environment, and conceptually through landscape – the meanings and associations assigned to features of the topography. Culture also interacts with language, via language use – cultural concerns and cultural practices shape language use by deploying the available linguistic resources that most effectively express those concerns and practices, while in turn the choice of linguistic expression and frequency with which particular expressions are deployed draw speakers' attention to those aspects of culture and the environment that they express. Finally, language use and the lexical and grammatical resources of a language interact in a bidirectional way: a language provides its speakers with the resources for expression, but language use ultimately shapes a language's resources through the conventionalisation of frequently used and effective expressions and the abandonment of unused forms.

Sociotopography has been applied as a lens through which we can understand diversity in the use of spatial frames of reference – strategies for locating or orienting entities with respect to other entities or the world. It can equally be applied to the construction of landscapes to which places are attached. The talk concludes that notions of place are constructed by humans in landscape through a complex interplay of the physical characteristics of topography (natural and constructed), its affordances, the nature of individual and group-level habitual engagement with environment, and intangible cultural meanings and associations assigned to landscape.