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Placing names conversion into verbs as a mean of explaining their outstanding properties

Conversión de nombres de lugares en verbos como medio para explicar sus propiedades sobresalientes

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ABSTRACT:

Verbs formed from toponyms by zero conversion are the focus of this article. The paper intends to show that converting a place name into a verb is a prominent way of explicating the place's salient properties. The data were collected from the corpora and detected on news, media sites and blogs. The study shows that verbs formed from place names demonstrate how people conceptualize places. Research shows that the linguistic salience is preceded by the conceptual salience that occurs when some striking event, fact, point of view about the place becomes strongly associated with it and regularly talked about.

KEYWORDS: Place Names, Salience Spatial, Cognition, Spatial Language.

RESUMEN:

Los verbos formados a partir de topónimos por conversión cero son el foco de este artículo. El artículo pretende mostrar que convertir un nombre de lugar en un verbo es una forma destacada de explicar las propiedades más destacadas del lugar. Los datos fueron recolectados de los corpus y detectados en sitios de noticias, medios y blogs. El estudio muestra que los verbos formados a partir de nombres de lugares demuestran cómo las personas conceptualizan los lugares y la relevancia lingüística está precedida por la importancia conceptual que ocurre cuando algún evento llamativo, el hecho sobre el lugar se asocia fuertemente con él.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Cognición Espacial, Lenguaje Espacial, Notoriedad, Topónimos.

1.INTRODUCTION

Place names are an important means to verbally convey human knowledge about space. This knowledge is not purely spatial. As Nova notes, “Each location, beside a specific layout and spatial organization, has a social meaning and cultural understanding about its function, nature, and role” (Nova: 2005, pp. 118-148).

With this assumption in mind, we focus on the issue of how these cultural, associative and sometimes subjective components of place names’ meanings are expressed in language. There is a gap concerning this question in the body of linguistic literature. Our research shows that toponyms conversion into verbs explicates features of places that become salient and frequently associated with them.

In English, conversion of nouns to verbs is a common way to linguistic innovation. According to Pinker, it “has been part of English grammar for centuries; it is one of the processes that make English (...) about a fifth of all English verbs were originally nouns” (Pinker: 2003). No wonder, even proper nouns undergo the process of ‘verbing’.

Our research of verbs formed from toponyms by zero conversion follows views in cognitive linguistics according to which semantics is approached from an encyclopedic perspective that does not separate knowledge about words from knowledge about the world (e.g.) (Langacker: 2002; Pakdel & Ashrafi: 2019; Villalobos & Ganga, 2016; Villalobos & Ganga, 2018; Villalobos, Guerrero & Romero, 2019). In this light, places are conceptually complex landmarks with an almost unlimited number of properties. The layer of historic, social, cultural knowledge, stereotypes, associations, personal experiences overlaying a place name is significant. This myriad of properties is transformed in individual’s mind into a unique conceptual configuration with personal value. As Erickson sums it up, “place is spacious with the meaning” (Erickson: 1993, pp. 391-405; Annía, Villalobos, Romero, Ramírez & Ramos: 2018).

This experience-generated subjectivity may account for the fact that verbal descriptions of places are approximate, they are inaccurate, vague, and ambiguous; it is also known that people prefer qualitative characterization of space to metric one. Subjective descriptions would inevitably lead to misunderstanding as what can be a meaningful place for one person is not necessarily considered as such by another. Approximation in place descriptions leaves many subjective things unspecified allowing people who are familiar with the environment share spatial knowledge based on the common experience of the place. The same is true about the whole communities and people belonging to one culture. The same place may mean different things to people from different cultures.

In spatial communication, conceptual features associated with a place name are revealed through referring expressions about places, place descriptions, route instructions, destination, and descriptions. However, not all the features are equally important. One of the important aspects in which cognitively relevant features manifest themselves is landmarks salience. What makes some features more salient is described by Winter, Truelove, Rajabifard, Duckham, Kealy, and Leach. Although they write about the concept of place in general, most of the factors they name can be applied to toponyms. Visual, social and structural factors suggested in the previous works are expanded by Winter, Truelove, Rajabifard, Duckham, Kealy and Leach to the following list:

Perceptual factors including visual (‘the blue building’ or ‘the large building’), aural (‘the quiet place’) and olfactory;

Individual experience (‘the place where I met you for the first time’) and individual preference (a place where I can get good coffee);

Collective experience, including historical (‘the place of first settlement’), cultural (‘the sacred place’) and functional factors (‘the (place of the) library’);

Structural factors about the street network (‘the place at the intersection’)” (Winter et al.: 2010; Laureano: 2018, pp. 4-7).

Further research mostly proves the validity of this or that factor. For example, Röser, Krumnack, Hamburger and Knauff show the interdependence of visibility and structural salience (Röser et al: 2012, pp. 82-87). In the work by Hamburger, Trillmich, Baier, Wolf and Roeser, global scale of visual landmarks is studied to prove their role in a city recognition (Hamburger: 2014, pp. 42-44; Kalogeropoulos et al.: 2020; Urdaneta & Villalobos: 2016; Villalobos & Ganga: 2016; Hernández, Villalobos, Morales & Moreno: 2016). Our research demonstrates that a prominent way of explicating place's salient properties is by converting a place name into a verb.

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

Corpus study was used to collect denominal verbs formed from toponyms and to perform quantitative analysis of the language data. The corpora that served these purposes were Time Magazine Corpus, British National Corpus, Corpus of Global Web-based English (<https://www.english-corpora.org/>). The reason for the use of several corpora is that most denominal verbs in question are not established in language, only a few can be found in dictionaries. As it takes time for a word to get its way to a dictionary, several resources should be used to collect data. Even the aforesaid corpora were not enough as they do not cover the most recent texts. Therefore the data collected from the corpora were enlarged with denominal verbs detected on the Internet. The Internet resources were mostly news and media sites and blogs. A quantitative study was followed by a semantic analysis of the collected language data.

3. RESULTS

According to the cognitive linguistics approach mentioned above, actions that denominal verbs name are those, which are conventionally connected with an entity whose name is used as a verb. Conventional knowledge about places named by toponyms involves motion concerning the places. This spatial component of generic knowledge is present in the meaning of a denominal verb formed from a place name. Some examples are “We Belize it”, “Prague around with Clementine”.

Taking into consideration the previously mentioned complexity of knowledge underlying place names, homogeneity cannot be expected from the class of the denominal verbs in question. Even the idea of motion concerning the place is complicated by the purpose, participants, reasons, results so that the verb refers to the whole situation.

For example, the spread of outsourcing in IT made many IT workers lose their jobs. Bangalore is known to be 'the outsourcing capital of the world'. In this situation, a new term 'to Bangalore' was coined and the phrase 'My job was bangalored' spread in the IT industry. The verb 'to Beijing' is even more complicated because its comprehension requires background knowledge not only about the described bangalored jobs situation but about the fact that Bangalore outsourcing is becoming less profitable due to the popularity and development of Beijing's IT industry. The response of IT workers to the changing situation is 'You might get Beijing'.

The previous examples show that permanence is not as important as it may be for the salience of other landmarks. Verbs demonstrate what is salient at a definite time. Therefore, some verbs become obsolete as 'to Copenhagen', 'to Rotterdam', 'to Barbados'. However, they may play a significant role as preservers of important events in history. For example, the meaning of the verb 'to Barbados' dates back to the events of the XVII century when the Irish and the Scottish were sent to the Caribbean Islands to work in the plantations. Another example is the verb 'to shanghai'. Online Etymology Dictionary says that the verb 'to shanghai' means “to drug a man unconscious and ship him as a sailor, 1854, American English, from the practice of kidnapping to fill the crews of ships making extended voyages, such as to the Chinese seaport of Shanghai” (Online Etymology Dictionary).

The cases described above refer to the situation of motion concerning the place whose name is used as a verb and cover the spatial uses of the resulting verbs. Another category of denominal verbs under study includes the verbs that refer to the situations not connected with places whose names the verbs are formed from. In this case, various features of places can become implicitly salient in the meaning of the denominal verb. The linguistic salience is preceded by the conceptual salience that occurs when some striking event, fact, point of view about the place becomes strongly associated with it and regularly talked about. When similar events occur denominal verbs are used to refer to them.

One of the examples is the verb 'to Iraq'. The meaning of the verb reflects the USA war operation in Iraq. It is shown by Urban dictionary: "owned by the rival unexpectedly and illegally, another way of saying 'invaded': The hacker iraqed the computer network system and now has the capability of changing private information secretly" (Peckham: 2009).

Another example is 'get London'. The expression appeared in the New Yorker and referred to the impression one got after visiting Fiamma, one of the restaurants in New York. Paumgarten writes "...the bottom rung is three courses for eighty-nine dollars. Throw in Barolo, tax, and tip, and, boink, you've been London" (Paumgarten: 2016). Though it refers to the place in New York, the verb says something about London. Of all the features of London, it picks up the price-to-value ratio and makes it salient. The fact that the author of the article does not explain the meaning of 'being London' shows that the opinion about London that found its place in the verb is common and widespread. It also demonstrates the conceptual salience of the feature built upon experiences of visiting the city or living in it.

Many-layered conceptual configuration with unique personal value stands behind the verb 'to Belize'. For example, Lambrechts reveals this conceptual complexity together with a strong emotional component in her book (Mieder: 2015, pp. 541-568). She writes about her experience of retiring to Belize and coming across many challenges having to cope with cultural idiosyncrasies. The verb occurs twice in the book. Firstly, the author describes her palapa that showed signs of premature decay because "the wood for the posts was not the resistant wood that John had said it was, and the thatch could have lasted for years if the palapa had been built in the sun instead of in the shade". "We were very disappointed at the loss of this garden feature and felt we had been 'Belize'," Lambrechts writes (Mieder: 2015, pp. 541-568; Mohammadi & Yekta: 2018, pp. 1-7). Secondly, the author cites J. Larder:

My neighbor's gone, my cash he took, His auntie's wife could never cook, My tools, my blocks, my roofing tin, Have vanished into the air so thin, Cement got wet, the sand was dirt, My funds are gone, I've lost my shit, The gas was bad, my truck has seized, I won't accept I've been "Belize", My health has failed, not feeling well, My worldly goods I have to sell, Going back home, where things are normal,

Where rules are rules and life is formal (Mieder: 2015, pp. 541-568). The use of 'be Belize' in the second context highlights conceptual complexity, richness and cultural peculiarity of the place whose name is used as the basis for forming the verb.

4. CONCLUSION

Verbs formed from place-names show how people conceptualize places, and which features and characteristics of places are salient. However, personal experiences and subjective views and impressions find their way in the meaning of the verbs. Actions that denominal verbs formed from toponyms' names express are conventionally connected with the place whose name is used as a verb. Conventional knowledge about places named by toponyms involves motion concerning the places.

This spatial component of generic knowledge is present in the meaning of a denominal verb formed from a place name. However, the idea of motion concerning the place is complicated by the purpose, participants,

reasons, and results so the verb highlights salient features at a definite time. They may play a significant role as preservers of important events in history.

The linguistic salience is preceded by the conceptual salience that occurs when some striking event, fact, point of view about the place becomes strongly associated with it and regularly talked about. When similar events, even not connected with the place, occur, denominal verbs are used to refer to them.

Places are complex spatial entities that can have an indefinite number of properties. Some of the properties are well known; some are unique. These properties are acquired through history and are connected with events, associations, subjective perceptions of the place; hence, the semantic characteristics of the resulting verbs are their heterogeneity, semantic flexibility, semantic instability in time, specific way of profiling salient features of the place. Knowledge of culture, as well as personal experience reflected in verbs, reveal general attitude to places.

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