

Australian Toponymy and Emerging Theories

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Toponyms in Australia offer researchers a wide canvas from which to draw inspiration. Indigenous names, colonial names, introduced and Anglo-Indigenous names pepper the landscape and the melange of toponymic types and etymologies stand as testament to the diverse national cultural heritage.

Traditionally, linguists working in the fields of Indigenous languages have focused on the cultural role of toponyms in the landscape. Their research has been distributed in large volumes, quite often combined with indexes of language-specific words. At a social level, etymological books of traditional or introduced ('colonial') names have been published by professional or amateur onomasticians. As a result there are a variety of texts for contemporary linguists and historians to analyse.

In combination with traditional etymological research, recent events- including name restoration and dual-naming programs, offer an insight into the changing psyche of the Australian community. Where names once seemed immutable, naming authorities have been working with communities to restore Indigenous names. The results of these attempts are mixed and research has shown that the outcomes are predicated by the existing cultural preferences of the dominant community members and by the engagement and educational programs offered by naming authorities.

This presentation will explore the rich history of Australian toponymy and provide an explanation of current official toponymic practice. Thought will be given to not only official toponymic practices, but also to emerging international research on theoretical toponymy. The latest developments in this domain offer an insight into the cultural import of toponyms.

Laura Kostanski is the Project Manager for the Office of Geographic Names Victoria, the Secretary of the Committee for Geographic Names Australasia, a Director of the International Council of Onomastic Sciences, an Adjunct Research Fellow at the University of Ballarat and is currently engaged with the CSIRO Australia on an UN/AusAID gazetteer project in Indonesia. In February Dr Kostanski is embarking on a Churchill Fellowship to discover the latest technology in crowd-sourcing toponyms for government gazetteers. Therefore, this presentation will include reference to the latest international developments in applied toponymy in conjunction with reflections on innovative toponymic theory.