

Toponymy 101 G...

*I am sometimes asked questions about how placenames are bestowed, who determines what names are conferred, how they are spelt, and so on... says **Jan Tent***

Why, for example, don't placenames with a possessive specific element (like *Paddy's River* and *Brown's Waterhole*) have the possessive apostrophe? Or why do we have to wait until someone has died before we can use their name in a placename?

Australia and New Zealand have tightly controlled placenaming protocols. Why? Well, if we didn't we'd have chaotic placenaming, with non-standardised spellings and signage, duplication of placenames, multiple names for the same feature, no records of placenames, and no precise data on the location of named features. But before I attempt to answer some of the specific questions people have asked me, a bit of background is required.

I've previously noted that living languages are always changing and that the only ones that don't are dead languages. Many countries have institutions (language academies) whose aim is to regulate the standard language; they often publish prescriptive dictionaries, which prescribe the meanings of words and their pronunciations. Perhaps the most famous of all of these academies is France's *Académie Française*, which is devoted to eliminating the so-called 'impurities' of language. It is the official authority on French usage, vocabulary and grammar. In particular, it has tried to prevent the anglicisation of the French language by recommending avoidance of words such as *computer*, *software* and *e-mail* in favour of French-coined neologisms.

Needless to say, one cannot legislate for language usage, and the Académie is losing the battle. However, there is one area in modern life where language-use legislation is effective and necessary—the official bestowal and registering of placenames. This is carried out by placenaming authorities.

Placenaming authorities

In a recent issue¹ we noted that each Australian State and Territory has a placenaming authority, as well as the Australian Antarctic Territory (under the Australian Antarctic Division), and the Great Barrier Reef (under the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority). The Department of Defence also has a role to play under the Australian Hydrographic Office and the Geospatial-Intelligence Organisation. Each of these authorities is governed by the legislation of its state/territory or

agency—hence, they have their own rules and regulations.

The Permanent Committee on Place Names (PCPN) is a permanent committee of the Intergovernmental Committee on Surveying and Mapping (ICSM). Its members consist of all the naming authorities in Australia and New Zealand. Among other things, its role is to coordinate, promote and communicate the consistent use of geographic placenames throughout Australia and New Zealand. PCPN, as we noted, has published a set of principles to be followed by the various Australian authorities. In answering some of those oft-posed questions on placenaming, I shall refer to the PCPN *Principles for the Consistent Use of Place Names*.

Spelling of placenames

The PCPN advises that placenames need to 'be easy to pronounce, spell and write; simple, concise and preferably of 50 or fewer characters; recognisable words or combinations of words; and in all respects in accordance with community standards.' (§4.7). This makes common sense.

Spelling—possessive apostrophe

The PCPN argues that the elimination of the possessive apostrophe facilitates 'the consistent use of a single form in each case and [assists] in the rapid retrieval of place names from emergency service databases, in the light of variable community usage and uncertainty as to whether the name concerned is singular or plural.' (§4.14). This policy dates back to 1966, when it was introduced by the NSW Geographical Names Board.

The Style Guide commonly used by government agencies (Snooks & Co., 2002, p. 86) concurs with this policy, declaring that placenames involving so-called possessives are all to be written without apostrophes. Australia Post has also adopted this policy in its postcode book. The USA has a similar practice, whereas in Britain a name can appear with or without an apostrophe in different parts of the country. Even though, as numerous placename signs in Australia show, the official policy is not always adhered to and some inconsistency exists, there are good reasons to maintain it. Originally, apostrophes lost favour in placename spellings because cartographers declared that they were often 'lost' on maps, especially on topographic

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maps. More recently, grammatical issues have been pressed. Can we truly say that the corner known as *Pearces Corner* really belongs to Pearce? *Pearces* is just the descriptor of the following noun; it is not the possessor of that noun. And does *Smiths Creek* commemorate one person with the surname *Smith* or a family of *Smiths*? Using apostrophes would require us to maintain the distinction between *Smith's Creek* and *Smiths' Creek*.

Spelling—diacritical marks

English words rarely have diacritical marks.² They are omitted in placenames, even when the placename is derived from a language where diacritical marks are used, for similar reasons as for the omission of apostrophes.

Spelling—hyphens

Hyphens are generally not used in Australian placenames, except when the placename contains a hyphenated surname (e.g. *Baden-Powell Waterhole*). Hyphens may also be used in placenames of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin, where that language has a recognised writing system which uses hyphens. Like apostrophes and diacritical marks, hyphens create difficulties for cartographers and hamper rapid retrieval of names from emergency service databases.

Structure of the name—the use of 'The'

Placenames that begin with *The...* (e.g. *The Pinnacle* and *The Basin*) are potentially confusing because it is not clear whether the *The* is truly part of the placename or merely a normal element in the grammar of the sentence. The PCPN recommends that a leading *The* should therefore not be used, unless there are strong historical reasons for doing so.

Need to know?

Do you want to keep track of naming proposals and decisions in your State or Territory? The various placename authorities always advertise such proposals and invite submissions from members of the public. Below are the links to the relevant webpages for **Victoria** and for **New South Wales**. The NSW Geographical Names Board also has a useful page that contains a number of important Fact Sheets.

Victoria

<https://www.propertyandlandtitles.vic.gov.au/naming-places-features-and-roads/naming-proposals>

NSW

http://www.gnb.nsw.gov.au/place_naming/current_proposals

http://www.gnb.nsw.gov.au/publications/fact_sheets

Personal & commemorative names

Many new places are named after eminent people, but only posthumously. Why? One obvious reason is it eliminates one area of corruption where an influential person might want a place named after him/herself and thus might bring pressure to bear to achieve that end. The PCPN notes: 'Names of living persons are by their nature subject to partisan perception and change in community judgment and acceptance. For this reason they are not efficient or effective choices for official placenames. Alternatives are to use commemorative plaques or naming a particular community facility such as a building or oval after the person to be commemorated.' (§4.6)

In future instalments of *Toponymy 101*, we'll look at how placenames act as identity markers. We'll also begin an introduction to the nature of Australia's Indigenous toponymy.

Endnotes

¹ See *Placenames Australia*, December 2016.

² A sign written above or below a letter (e.g. ā, ó, î, ö, ñ, ç) to indicate a difference in pronunciation from the same letter when unmarked or differently marked.

References

Permanent Committee on Place Names (2016). *Principles for the consistent use of place names* (October 2016). <www.icsm.gov.au/cgna/consistent_place_names_principles.pdf>

Snooks & Co. (2002). *Style manual for authors, editors and printers* (6th ed.). Milton, Qld: John Wiley & Sons.

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