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## **A Critique of Keith Basso's 'Speaking with Names': Language and Landscape among the Western Apache**

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**Abstract:**

*This paper critically examines Basso's paper on 'Speaking with Names': Language and Landscape among the Western Apache. Methodologically, it comments on the Basso's basic ideas in the paper and underscores areas of weakness. Most interestingly, Basso explores the significant influence of people's linguistic geography on their discourses. He reveals how what is said is influenced by what is perceived about the environment. His paper gives a unique revelation on the nexus holding between language and landscape; another dimension of understanding discourse. However, He prioritizes place names as the basic and only way of understanding talk or interaction with a neglect of non-verbal aspect such as gestures and signs in the discussion of language and landscapes.*

### **1. Overview**

Basso's paper reveals the significant connection between what people think and say, and their local geography. He reveals the importance of foreign geographical objects and acts. He reinforces the uniqueness of every landscape, society or environment and how our understanding of the external realities are products of our local cultural materials. Knowing little of the latter may affect one's sense of things in one's environment. Thus, communication is not based on language alone but also on landscape, local geographical objects, physical attributes and cultural associations.

Essentially, the constructions of reality are seen as conceptions of reality. What people construct about their environments is a personalized manifestation of what they perceive or construe in their minds. He identifies three ways in which people involve themselves in their geographical landscape including observing the landscape to understand it, engaging in activities with it and communicating about it.

He explains two types of talk; 'ordinary talk' and 'situated talk'. The former relates to how people name and classify their landscapes based on their understanding of how they occupy it while the latter is how people interpret forms of social action occurring in the landscape. People attach cultural meanings to landscapes as instantiated in the 'Go make a nest on forty-second street' example where a character tells his chronically unfaithful lover to express something about their precarious relationship. This is, however, also based on the shared understanding of this place between both parties.

The paper also comments on the symbolic relevance of place names and toponyms in communities. They serve as referential vehicles used to denote or 'pick out' objects in the world. Their evocativeness is revealed in their use for mental and emotional associations. Basso informs that they have associations of time and space, of history and events, of persons and social activities and so on.

He reveals the connection between language and thought. Using the example of a Western Apache talk involving Emily and Robert with Lola Machuse coming in certain times, the author reveals how abstract, fragmented a discourse could appear especially in this environment until connections are made, through an imaginative process, to pictures and events to achieve better understanding. Thus, language and thought are viewed in visual terms. Thus, Talk is more of an imaginative process where participants beyond what is said think through pictures. Two basic concepts explain what goes on in the talk process. The concept of 'adding on' to depictions made available in a conversation and the concept of 'respect' which is generally considered as 'kindness and politeness'. Respect is displayed in the speakers refraining from 'speaking too much'. It is believed that this insults the imaginative capabilities of other people.

Aside the importance of thought, there's the importance of place among these people. It is believed that there are no placeless events and the location of an event is an integral part of the event itself. Place names are used to make ancestral connections and provide accurate description on events.

Basso also differentiates between the everyday use of abbreviated place-names and the special occurrences when the full place-name is spoken. When speaking with place-names, those involved in the conversation are following a social norm that prohibits the communication of disapproval or judgment when someone else has made serious errors in judgment or behavior. Speaking with names invokes the voices of the ancestors and allows "the past to inform...the present" (91). It is through these memories that advice and sympathy are given and expressed. One of the Apache conventions in conversation is a requirement of kindness and speaking with names allows for this without criticizing or speaking harshly of others.

## 2. Strengths

The paper interestingly explores the significant connection between language and landscape. It reveals how what we say is influenced by what we personally perceive about the environment. It also comments on the importance of thought process in talk. This reveals how people are able to draw on the imaginative or cognitive using pictorial depictions to achieve better understanding of what is previously said.

The idea of place names which was pointed out is a remarkable point in the paper. Place names are highly symbolic and significant in discourse. It helps to connect the past, draw on it to better interpret the present. When we talk, we also orient to our cultural geography. Thus, 'talk' does not exist in isolation but in *connections*

## 3. Weaknesses

The paper prioritizes place names as the basic and only way of understanding talk or interaction. I believe that while place names are truly important, other aspects of a talk are equally important in getting a holistic understanding of the talk. The social acts and pacts performed by the utterances in a talk are very fundamental aspects of the talk that also helps to inform meaning.

Also, the paper says nothing or little on the non-verbal aspect since the place names provide more of historical and spatial contexts to the talk. The paper fails to comment on the non-verbal aspect such as gestures and signs in the discussion of language and landscapes. These are also important aspect of 'talk' and discourse.

## 4. Relevance to other Contexts

The idea of place names clearly reinforced in the paper is remarkably significant in several cultural contexts. More specifically, place names in African cultural geography play a significant role in African narratives. It is not uncommon to find place names in African literary texts being used to make connections. Also, African authors like Niyi Osundare use place names in their poetry to dialogue with their cultural ancestry. Place names evoke images that cause people make connections. Sometimes, when we interact with the past, we better understand the present.

## 5. Conclusion

Most commendably, Basso's paper unravels the unique intricacy and nexus between language and landscapes which reveals another interesting dimension of understanding discourse.

## 6. References

1. Basso, Keith. 1990. 'Speaking with Names': Language and Landscape among the Western Apache" In *Western Apache Language and Culture: Essays in Linguistic Anthropology*. (138-173)
2. Cameron, Deborah. 2007. *Working with Spoken Discourse*. London: Sage