LINGUISTIC EROSION ON THE CHESAPEAKE:
Intergenerational Diachronic shifts in lexicalizations of the Bay

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Abstract

This article examines shifting lexicalizations of the Chesapeake Bay in three generations' nomenclature, and points to a significant diachronic shift in environmental labelings currently occurring in an Atlantic seaboard speech community. The question investigated is whether lexicalizations about environmental preservation are the first step in the educational process towards a realization of the saliency of the environment. In short, would young generations, and young minds benefit from an overt knowledge and teaching of the extent to which current linguistic vocalizations reflect our orientation either towards or away from environmental concerns? A related query is to investigate if modern lexicalizations of our environment in fact reflect generational shifts away from naturalistic privileging, and consequently respect for the power and pivotal role of natural phenomena, to a much more anthropocentric emphasis which instead privileges human-made "creations" over nature's pervasive bounty? Stated differently, do current vocal lexicalizations stress 'our' creations over nature's? Evidence from an informal poll conducted by in-service educators administered to 3 generations of 72 speakers in a local peninsular region is presented and analyzed. While the results do point to potentially alarming trends in 21st century vocalizations about the environment, the essay does highlight some optimistic trends. What this informal study does underscore is the potential power of oral linguistic choices to change mental dispositions – a diachronic shift at work shaping and encoding 'new' world-views. The essay concludes by speculating on whether the younger generation is more "orally" conscious of its environment than its parents. If so, could the current century's increasing focus on environmental consciousness already be having an impact on young generations? – a trend we hope continues.

Introduction

In studies correlating language and culture, a salient and persistent debate concerns the influence of language on culture. Often conceived of as the classic "chicken and egg" question, theorists and educators continue to postulate hypotheses concerning this link, namely, the extent to which language simultaneously reflects and encodes world views. Of particular importance in this debate is the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis which argues that linguistic choices can indeed have an effect on societal attitudes and behavior. The best analogy for this linguistic influence is: "putting on a special pair of glasses that heighten some aspects of the physical and mental world while dimming others" (Mesthrie, Swann, Deumert and Leap, 2000, p.7). While the hypothesis in its strong form, complete linguistic determinism, has been severely critiqued (Salzman, 2007, p 56), the hypothesis in its weak form which argues for a mere influencing of linguistic choices on concomitant world views – often labeled linguistic relativity has seen a recent resurfacing in academic discussions of political correctness (Lakoff, 2000).

It is arguable that the 21ˢᵗ century in Western culture is the century of environmental concern. It is no surprise therefore that even popular cultural arenas such as the Academy of the Motion Picture of Arts and Sciences in its 2007 Oscar Awards declaratively went "green" (Milliken, 2007), with more thematic foci on environmental issues emerging in recent adolescent Newbury winners like *Hoot* (Hiassen, 2003) and its subsequent 2006 motion picture adaptation (Shriner, 2006) bearing the same title.   What is important to ask at this point is whether lexicalizations about environmental preservation are the first step in the educational process towards a realization of the saliency of preserving our environment. In short, would young generations, and young minds benefit from an overt knowledge and teaching of the extent to which current linguistic vocalizations reflect our orientation either towards or away from environmental concerns? A related query is to investigate if modern lexicalizations of our environment in fact reflect generational shifts away from naturalistic privileging, and consequently respect for the power and pivotal role of natural phenomena, to a much more anthropocentric one which instead privileges human-made "creations" over nature's pervasive bounty? Alternatively, do current lexicalizations stress 'our' creations over nature's? Should we be concerned?

If recent evidence from a local linguistic survey conducted by a number of pre-service teachers is any indication, we do indeed have reason to be concerned. In a formal poll of 72 residents in a rural peninsula community sandwiched between the mighty Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Sea, the research question was to investigate whether a local expression: "across the bay" defined as "west of the Chesapeake Bay" (Fisher, 1986, p.4) and first cited in: *The Eastern Shore Wordbook*, published 21 years ago, was still in use among area residents. The 72 polled residents were all born in the region, and had spent a minimum consecutive span of 10 years on the peninsula. Respondents spanned 3 different generations in the age-groups: 15-30; 31-60, and 61-plus (24 in each age group). Respondents were asked to identify if they: 1. Used the expression 2. Had heard of the expression 3. Never used the expression, or 4. Had never heard of the expression.

Why this singular focus on just one oral expression: "across the bay"? To understand the importance, keep in mind that the phrase encodes a point of orientation measured in relation to a large body of water: in this case – a bay. In Whorfian terms, this lexicalization reflects the power and might of naturalistic and environmental phenomena as contrasted with, for example, lexicalizations such as: "across the bridge" which reflect a point of orientation measured in relation to a human-made infrastructure made to 'conquer' this naturalistic phenomena. The question then is to investigate the current contradiction between what has been called "mental culture", defined as "world-view or value orientations" (Salzman, 2007, p. 57), and its concomitant link to "material culture: the material products of behavior" (Salzman, 2007, p. 57) – simply stated, the difference between a privileging of a bay over a bridge by people.

Linguists utilizing a Whorfian paradigm have argued that "objects or forces in the physical environment become labeled in language only if they have cultural significance" – that is, if they "take up the attention of the community" (Bonvillain, 2003, p. 47). Indigenous Native American Nations have consistently shown a preference for encoding

the physical universe in and through language. In his classic 1912 study of the Paiute Native American Nation of the Southwest United States, Sapir argued that "people name details when their survival depends directly on their environment" (Bonvillain, 2003, p. 48). Approximately ninety five years ago, at the turn of the 20th century, eminent anthropologist, Edward Sapir, recorded an extensive list of environmental lexicalizations in the Paiute language which overtly demonstrated a reverence for a plethora of natural topographical elements central to the Paiute people's survival. Sapir provided some English translations for these geographical lexicalizations chronicled in the following extensive list:

> divide, ledge, sand flat, semicircular valley, circular valley or hollow, spot of level ground in mountains surrounded by ridges, plain valley surrounded by mountain, plain desert, knoll, plateau, canyon without water, canyon with creek, wash or gutter, gulch, slope of mountain or canyon wall receiving sunlight, shaded slope of mountain or canyon wall, rolling country intersected by several small hill ridges. (Sapir, 1912, p. 91).

That these translated English terms capture what are single words or lexicalizations in the Paiute language is demonstratable proof of: "The relative interest and importance that speakers attribute to environmental conditions" (Bonvillain, 2003, p. 48). It is no accident that the subject of the current essay is to investigate whether lexicalizations related to the "Chesapeake" a lexicalization in and of itself loaded with history, and often attributed to the Susquehanock/Susquehanna and Algonquin native peoples – a word meaning "great shellfish bay" (Rountree and Davidson, 1997) are still prominent in the vocalizations of area residents. As an aside, it has been recently recorded in ethnolinguistic accounts that: "Of perhaps 400 Indian languages spoken in North America in 1500, about 45 are in common use today," (Farenthold, 2007, p.A1), a fact that reasserts the need for current emphases in educational curricula on the consequences of exponential environmental and linguistic destruction. First, the findings of the current survey.

Survey data in the current study demonstrate that in the oldest generation (aged 61 and above), 97% of the respondents had either used or heard of the localism "across the bay" (with only 3% reporting that they had either never used or never heard of the expression). In the middle generations, aged 31-60, 95% of the respondents had either used or heard the phrase "across the bay" (with only 5% reporting that they had either never used or never heard of the expression). What is most striking however, is that in the youngest generation of speakers: aged 15-30, only 78% of the respondents had either used or heard of the localism "across the bay" (with 22% reporting that they had either never used or never heard of the expression). The 19% drop in usage of this phrase in the oldest versus youngest populations does point to evidence for the phenomenon of "linguistic lagging" (Bonvillain, 2003, p. 48) defined as a situation in which "words or contrasts may reflect previous rather than current cultural interests" (p. 48). The results speak for themselves and do paint a pretty pessimistic picture of our current generation's focus. The current study does, however, present some promising findings regarding current trends, and subsequently, underscores the latent potential of educational curricular

matter in empowering young minds with key knowledge about their natural world. Back to the survey data.

What is important to stress is that a third of the respondents provided oral "alternatives" for what some felt was a jaded or archaic localism. Perhaps the greatest evidence for shifts from naturalistic to more anthropocentric orientations comes in the analysis of the 24 tokens of alternative expressions provided by the residents for the expression "across the bay" as visualized in the three charts below:

NATURALISTIC LABELINGS: (ALTERNATIVES PROFFERED): 5 TOTAL		
Youngest Generation (2)	Median Generation (1)	Oldest Generation (2)
• Chesapeake Bay • Across the Chesapeake Bay	• Across the Chesapeake Bay	• Chesapeake Bay • Across the water

ANTHROPOCENTRIC LABELINGS: (ALTERNATIVES PROFFERED): 9 TOTAL		
Youngest Generation (5)	Median Generation (3)	Oldest Generation (1)
• Over the Bridge • Other side of the Bridge • The Bridge • Over the Bridge • Across the Bridge	• Across the Bridge • Over the Bridge • Cross the Bridge	• Across the Bridge

GEOGRAPHICAL LABELINGS: (ALTERNATIVES PROFFERED): 10 TOTAL		
Youngest Generation (3)	Median Generation (4)	Oldest Generation (3)
• Western Shore of Maryland • Western Shore (x 2)	• Over on the Western Shore • Western Shore (x 3)	• Western Shore (x 3)

NATURALISTIC VERSUS ANTHROPOCENTRIC LABELINGS: AN ANALYSIS
Overall, 64% of the alternative lexicalizations provided – approximately two thirds of these two categories of expressions – reveal a current preference for anthropocentric privileging (see. e.g., *over the Bridge*; *the Bridge*; *across the Bridge*; *cross the Bridge*; *other side of the Bridge*; and finally, *Bridge)* as compared to 36% of the alternatives – approximately one third of the expressions – which allude to naturalistic orientations (see, e.g. *Chesapeake Bay*; *Across the water*, and finally, *Across the Chesapeake Bay)*, a finding which is very revealing of current shifts in mental dispositions which seem to overtly and consistently be privileging anthropocentric over naturalistic creations. Thus,

the oldest generation had 11% of such labelings versus the median generation at 33% with the youngest at 56% – on average an almost doubling of anthropocentric labels with each succeeding generation.

However, in an analysis of each separate generation's preferences, a different picture emerges. From a numeric point of view, the oldest generation (ages 61 and above) provided alternative tokens which were 67% naturalistic: "*Across the Water* and *Across the Chesapeake Bay*" as contrasted with 33% anthropocentric: "*Across the Bridge*".

In the two younger generations, however a revolutionary change is at work. Examining the survey data shows a remarkable, almost reverse shift at work – a preference for anthropocentric over naturalistic labels particularly in the median generation, aged 31-60 with 75% of the alternative expressions provided for the localism "*Across the Bay*" being anthropocentric in focus. Included in this list in addition to "*Across the Bridge*" were the expressions: "*Cross the Bridge*";" and "*Over the Bridge*," with a lone token of "*Across the Chesapeake Bay*", bringing the total proffered alternatives with a naturalistic focus to only 25% of the total for this generation. These are perhaps the most significant, and remarkable of findings indicating an almost complete reversal of preferences of anthropocentric over naturalistic in the median generation when contrasted with the oldest generation.

Results in the youngest generation: ages 15-31, show a similar trend for lexicalizing human structures at 71% anthropocentric when contrasted with the naturalistic alternatives proffered for the localism at 29%. On the list were: "*Over the Bridge*"; and "*Across the Bridge*". Under the anthropocentric labels, there were two novel alternatives provided by this generation. The first: "*Other side of the Bridge*" shows this generation's spotlighting of the bridge rather than the bay as its point of orientation in the label. The second novel oral phrase – and one not reported in any of the other generations polled was: "*The Bridge*" – evidence for the complete adoption of infrastructure over nature – in fact a vocalization deleting any links to nature in this single noun phrase. For this group, the only naturalistic alternatives proffered were: "*Chesapeake Bay*" and "*Across the Chesapeake Bay*."

Why are these results significant? First off, they do demonstrate the power of learned behavior. If as the data indicates, it is the middle generation with its highest preference for infrastructure over nature at 75% that is the linguistic trendsetter, it is no accident to see this tendency re-occurring in the youngest of generations – in a metaphorical sense their children, and evidence of *linguistic lagging* (Bonvillain, 2003, p. 48). What is significant however, and a departure from this linguistic fad, is the 4% drop in such linguistic preferences in the youngest generation which shows only a 71% preference for man-made labels over naturalistic privilegings with a concomitant increase of 4% in naturalistic choices when compared to the median generation. What accounts for this shift in focus? While it is indeed hard to speculate on the etymology of these new and minimally optimistic trends, what this informal study does underscore is the power of language to change – to reflect mental changes in dispositions – a diachronic shift at work shaping and encoding 'new' world-views. Could it be possible that the younger

generation is more environmentally conscious than its parents? If so, could the current century's increasing focus on environmental consciousness already be having an impact on young generations – a trend we hope continues?

CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY SHIFTS: COMMON NOUNS VERSUS PROPER NOUNS

Of the alternative expressions proffered, 10 of the tokens (42%) were in some way related to the expression: *Western Shore* used consistently by all three generations as a proper noun, a place name, rather than as a common noun or a geographical descriptor of naturalistic phenomena as evidenced in the chart below:

GEOGRAPHICAL LABELINGS: (ALTERNATIVES PROFFERED): 10 TOTAL		
Youngest Generation (3)	Median Generation (4)	Oldest Generation (3)
• Western Shore of Maryland • Western Shore (x 2)	• over on the Western Shore • Western Shore (x 3)	• Western Shore (x 3)

To clarify the two uses of the label namely the capitalized "*Western Shore*" versus its uncapitalized, common noun equivalent "*western shore*", an informal corpus analysis of the expression was conducted in a national newspaper database. A search of the capitalized term: *Western Shore* in a national newspaper database spanning five well-known newspapers namely: *The Baltimore Sun*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Washington Post* revealed over 400 tokens of the expression. A random analysis of one of the articles appearing in *The Washington Post* on the topic of hunting reveals the use of the expression as it appears in the following two sample sentences [boldfaced for identification]:

Sample #1:

"With a five goose per day limit on the **Western Shore** of Maryland where resident geese are considered a nuisance by farmers and golfers, Hoke found a use for the excess." (Philips, 2006, E.5)

Sample #2:

"Then a couple of weeks later, he lined up a duck hunt for three fellows from the paralyzed Veterans of America at Asquith Island on the **Eastern Shore**" (Philips, 2006, E. 5).

The use of *Western Shore* with its equivalent *Eastern Shore* as a proper noun as opposed to a common noun is well chronicled in recent publications (Moose, 2001; 1999), and also noted in hypermedia encyclopedias. Consider the following entry on the subject which sums up the diachronic shift from common to proper noun nomenclature of this key regional area in local parlance, and with continued codification most likely to become part of the national parlance:

> Maryland's **Western Shore**, not to be confused with Western Maryland, is an area of Maryland west of the Chesapeake Bay. The term does not identify an official region of Maryland but it is often used in contrast to "Eastern Shore". The Western Shore overlaps with the Baltimore-Washington Metropolitan Area and with Southern Maryland. Since it is not an officially defined region, there is no official border for the Western Shore but it can be taken to include the following counties, which border the Chesapeake Bay on the west: Harford County; Baltimore County; Baltimore City; Anne Arundel County; Calvert County; and St. Mary's County. To residents of the Eastern Shore, the term "Western Shore" or "western shore" can mean all of the counties of Maryland west of the Chesapeake Bay, particularly the Baltimore-Washington Metropolitan Area. (Western Shore, 2007)

The proper noun use of *Western Shore* then exists in sharp contrast to its common noun usage still found in some circles for example in a recent environmental article the term is used as a common noun descriptor as evidenced in the following sample sentence reproduced below [boldfaced for identification]:

Sample #3:

"This species has a historic range from New Jersey to Cape Cod and along much of the **eastern and western shorelines of the Chesapeake Bay** from southern Maryland to Virginia." (Fenster, Knisley and Reed, 2006, p.11).

It must be emphasized however, that the title of this scientific article used the proper noun, capitalized version of *Western Shore* in its title – increasing testament to this shift in cultural geographical labeling, with both the terms, capitalized and uncapitalized, proper noun and common noun appearing in the same article.

It is important to clarify why the expression *Western Shore* as a proper noun needs to be viewed as more anthropocentric than naturalistic in its point of orientation, an understanding based on a complete comprehension of the local terrain and the history of road and bridge construction over a vast naturalistic body of water such as the Chesapeake Bay listed as the: "largest estuary in the United States." (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chesapeake_Bay p. 1). According to Kozel (2003), "When the Chesapeake Bay Bridge was opened to traffic on July 30, 1952, it not only marked the physical connection of the Eastern and Western Shores of Maryland, but also marked the successful completion of a forty-five year struggle to accomplish this purpose" (p. 1). We are further told: "Prior to this time, travelers between shores were compelled to use

ferries or to journey around the head of the Bay." (Kozel, 2003. p. 1). This anthropocentric feat in the words of Kozel (2007) resulted in a bridge boasting "a shore-to-shore length of 4.3 miles," with the *Bay Bridge*, as it is locally known, listed as "among the world's longest and most scenic over-water structures." (p. 1). The impact of the bridge in creating an "Eastern Shore" and "Western Shore" – a cultural and geographical starting and ending point in the psyche of locals in the region is reiterated in the following quote:

> Since its construction, the bridge has made significant impacts on both sides of the bay, among them has been the growth of Eastern Shore communities. When the bridge was first built in 1952, and again when the second bridge was built in 1973, the Eastern Shore was given easier access to Baltimore and Washington, causing areas in southern Queen Anne's County to develop as bedroom communities. This extension of the Baltimore-Washington suburbs has led Queen Anne's County to be listed as part of the Baltimore-Washington Metropolitan Area. The bridges have also given easier access to Ocean City from the Western Shore, which has caused Ocean City to grow from a small town to one that is said to become the second largest city in Maryland during the summer. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maryland_Route_404)

For outsiders then, what this means is that the proper noun usage of Western Shore and its equivalent Eastern Shore can not and should not be understood to be physical labels for the sides, or shores of the Chesapeake Bay. Rather, these terms should be understood to be cultural labelings for metropolitan regions. These place names should be viewed as emphasizing areas of human settlement rather than labels privileging naturalistic phenomena in this case, the diametric banks of the Chesapeake Bay. What this analysis therefore demonstrates is that the expression: *Western Shore*, provided as an alternative 42% of the time in the current data is a significant linguistic term of diachronic shift towards anthropocentric, rather than naturalistic orientations, and should be viewed as such. Also important to emphasize is that it is only in the youngest generation that a variant of the expression: "Western Shore of Maryland" is provided, a label reflecting a focus away from the naturalistic bay-centric focus to instead a cartographic, man-made, map-focus. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to speculate on the reasons for such a psychological shift in the youngest generation (also avid users of *Google-based, Map-Quest* technology), it has to be emphasized that even though the tokens of *Western Shore* and its variants are being treated as a separate label in this study, they are indeed anthropocentric in focus and could, in fact, should be included in the category of anthropocentric labeling. In the event that they were to be included in this category, 79% of the alternative tokens proffered would end up being anthropocentric in focus; with a mere 21% being naturalistic in focus, data strongly indicating an overwhelming trend towards the privileging of human over environmental creations in current place nomenclature in this particular peninsular speech community.

So, while Hollywood goes green, perhaps our curricula can and should also go green, and overtly stress both the power and the need to orally prioritize overt "environment-centric" vocal encodings and lexicalizations so that our youngest generations, those still being

educated, have both time and choice to lexicalize both their awareness of and orientation towards environmental phenomena in and through their everyday linguistic choices. With 'green' curricular choices, this generation like its grandparents and peoples past will have the option of 'seeing' and consequently consciously 'encoding' and verbalizing saliency and environmental significance to: *The Bay* rather than its modern creation, *The Bridge*.

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