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All That's in a Name

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For years I have argued that secondary English classes are more interesting and enriching for students and teachers alike if those classes include some language exploration and play. Among possible focal points for such exploration and play, I would include euphemisms, slang, jargon, malapropisms, mondegreens, neologisms, spoonerisms, nonce words, ambiguous headlines, proverbs from various cultures, and roots and their derivatives.

Perhaps the best way to carry out such exploration is to make its focal point closely associated with the primary subject matter for the day, as when the teacher plans instruction on adverbs and devotes some time to fun with Tom Swifties. In the most common kind of Tom Swifty, a line of quoted speech appears along with a conversational tag. The tag concludes with an adverb that puns on the substance of the quoted speech. Here is an example: "*Who cares that this bouquet is missing a flower?*" Tom said *lackadaisically*. Another fairly common kind of Tom Swifty is useful during the study of verbs, for in this kind, a line of quoted speech and a conversational tag both appear, but the tag includes a punning verb, not a punning adverb. Here is an example of this kind of Swifty: "*I could go on and on about it, for it's clear that male bees do no work,*" Tom *droned*.

Sometimes, of course, it can be difficult to associate the focal point of language exploration and play with the primary subject matter of the day; but I have seen teachers incorporate language exploration and play within their classrooms in other ways. Some use language exploration and play to begin each of their classes; other teachers use such activities to conclude their classes. Some teachers allot a portion of one class per week—usually on Friday—for special activities with language; others keep a file related to linguistic curiosities for the times when they need "sponge" activities.

The specific kind of activity I am recommending

in this essay is the exploration of toponyms. Toponyms are place names, and the names I will focus on here are all associated with settlements in Michigan. My fascination with these began over thirty years ago in a class in American English taught by the linguistic geographer Raven McDavid at the University of Chicago.

One day, while doing a reading assignment—I think it was in *American English* by Albert H. Markwardt, I came across a section about place names in Michigan, and I was immediately entranced. I learned, for example, that *Ishpeming*, the name of an Upper Peninsula town west of Marquette, came from the Chippewa word for heaven or high place. I discovered that Kipling, another Upper Peninsula town, had been named by Fred Underwood, once the general manager of the Soo Railroad Line, to honor the English writer. I was amazed that *Novi*, the name for a suburb northwest of Detroit, at least according to some sources, was derived from *No. VI*, which was used because the site was the sixth terminus on a plank road from Detroit. And I could scarcely believe that *Marenisco*, the name for a town in the extreme western end of the Upper Peninsula, was formed by taking the first three letters of each part of the name of the wife of a local lumber baron: *Mary Eni/d Sco/lt*. As far back as I can remember, I have been fascinated with etymologies. But as I realized in that American English class, the etymologies of these place names had more than normal interest for me since they open windows on fascinating and important aspects of Michigan's history. Plus some of these etymologies are impressively intricate.

Bringing such place names to the attention of students can lead them to some significant learning about language and linguistic processes. For example, they will learn that people in certain kinds of positions and with certain kinds of power will be set up to bestow names. In Michigan, for instance, the ones who named were often those who bought and platted land, who acquired extensive forests and harvested the trees in them, who set up sawmills, who owned and operated mines, who ran railroad lines, or who led various religious groups into new territory. Students will also learn about various kinds of ingenuity in coming up with place names, as in the case of the people who came up

with the name *Michillinda* for a resort on White Lake; they invented this name since those who vacationed there came from Michigan, Illinois, and Indiana. And students will even make some interesting connections to languages other than English. You do not have to spend much time with a map of Michigan to come across names derived from Chippewa, Dutch, Finnish, French, German, Irish, and Polish, to name just a handful.

As students learn these things, they will also discover how place names reflect the social, cultural, and economic history of Michigan. Prominent among subjects for study in this regard will be the historical importance of mining and lumbering in our state. Other interesting subjects will be the states that settlers in Michigan moved from as well as the countries various immigrant groups left in order to settle here. Still another fascinating subject area is what religious groups various congregations split off from in order to foster their own religious practices here.

If you wish to learn more about place names in Michigan, I would recommend examining Walter Romig's *Michigan Place Names*, over six hundred pages of details about past and present place names in our state. Using this book, you

could put together various sets of names, each name within a set sharing a particular characteristic. For instance, you could put together a set of names for places near your school (I would put *Alto* in my set, in part because its derivation from Latin is interesting [from *altus*, meaning "high"], and in part because one of my colleagues lives near there). You could choose names that were borrowed or derived from Native American languages, such as *Saugatuck*. You could choose names that came from prominent immigrant groups (such as *Toivola*, the Finnish name for "vale of hope"). You could choose names that were derived from prominent political figures, such as *Grant*, or you could choose names that were created by combining Greek or Latin words, such as *Casnovia*. You could come up with an impressive set of names associated with mythology or literature, such as *Ramona* and *Undine*. Finally, you could even come up with a set of names reflecting various social virtues, such as *Temperance*.

For more details about interesting place names in Michigan, perhaps you and your students would like to try the following quiz, which I put together using *Michigan Place Names*:

Place Names in Michigan

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Allendale 2. Alverno 3. Bessemer 4. Caberfac 5. Chicora 6. Clinton 7. Frankenmuth 8. Germfask 9. Tecumseh 10. Kaleva 11. Laurium 12. Les Cheneaux Islands 13. Marne 14. New Groningen 15. Roscommon 16. Rudyard 17. Shelldrake 18. Sobieski 19. Wenona Beach 20. Ypsilanti | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Formed from the first letters of the last names of the first eight settlers b. Named for a hero of the Greek war of independence c. From French for "the channels" d. Named for the father of the Erie Canal e. Named for the son of a well-known Revolutionary War figure f. Derived from the name of a Finnish epic g. Named for an English author h. Named for a province in the Netherlands i. Named for the discoverer of a smelting process j. Named for a Polish king k. Named for a boat that sank in Lake Michigan l. Combining part of the name for a district in Bavaria and the German word for courage m. Named for the mountain on which the patron saint of this community received the stigmata n. Named after a kind of duck o. Named after a Shawnee chief p. Named for the mother of Hiawatha in Longfellow's poem q. From the Gaelic words for stag's head r. Named after a county in Ireland s. Named for a famous World War I battle t. Named after a mining district of ancient Greece |
|--|---|

Investigating toponyms in Michigan is just one kind of language exploration and play you can use in classrooms. Whatever kind of language exploration and play you decide to use, though, my hope is that it will lead students to be more curious about language and its various uses. If that happens, you are in a better position, I believe, to move them toward using language more skillfully and responsibly. And once students are committed to that kind of language use, they should be willing to work for more skillful and responsible uses of language in society in general. If language exploration can have such effects, it will definitely have proved itself a worthwhile activity in English classes.

Works Cited

- Marckwardt, Albert H. *American English*. London: Oxford University, 1958.
- Romig, Walter, L.H.D. *Michigan Place Names, The History of the Founding and the Naming of More than Five Thousand Past and Present Michigan Communities*. Detroit: Wayne State University, 1986.

Appendix

Answers (Most Accompanied by Quotations from *Michigan Place Names*)

1. e: “[N]amed for Captain Hannibal Allen, son of Ethan Allen, of Revolutionary War fame” (p. 18).
2. m: Once named Sova, “the village was renamed to honor the patron of the parish, St. Francis of Assisi, who, while praying at Mount Alverno, received the stigmata” (p. 22).
3. i: Named for “Sir Henry Bessemer (1813-1898), who discovered the smelting process which bears his name” (page 59).
4. q: “[N]amed by Kenneth MacKenzie, of Chicago, the name being derived from Cabar Feiah (in Gaelic, stag’s head), a symbol on the MacKenzie crest dating from 1225” (p. 91).
5. k: “[N]amed after a boat which sank in Lake Michigan” (p. 114).
6. d: “[N]amed for DeWitt Clinton, father of New York State’s Erie Canal, on which so many early settlers came to Michigan” (p. 121).
7. l: This “name combined Franconia, a district of Bavaria, and muth, the German for courage” (p. 209).
8. a: “[F]rom a word formed from the surname initials of the

eight founding settlers of 1881: John Grant, Matthew Edge, George Robinson, Thaddeus Mead, Dr. W.W. French, Ezekiel Ackley, Oscar Shepherd, Hezekiah Knaggs” (p. 221).

9. o: “[N]amed after the Shawnee chief Tecumseh” (p. 551).
10. f: Once named *Crossing*, it was renamed “Kaleva, a name derived from that of the national Finnish epic, Kalevala” (p. 297).
11. t: “Laureium, in Attica, a district of ancient Greece, was a famed mining site,--there silver, here copper” (p. 320).
12. c: “[L]es cheneaux, in French the channels, has been corrupted locally as the Snows” (p. 325).
13. s: It was once named Berlin “because of the many German settlers in the area; but due to conflicting emotions arising during World War I, the name was changed on June 5, 1919, commemorating the Battle of the Marne, in which so many American soldiers participated” (p. 354).
14. h: “[N]amed after Groningen, a province in the Netherlands” (p. 394).
15. r: This city was once known as the Robinson plat, but it was renamed “after a county in Ireland” (p. 484).
16. g: Once named Pine River, this village was renamed at the suggestion of Fred Underwood, then manager of the Soo Line, to honor Rudyard Kipling (p. 488).
17. n: “[N]amed after the merganser or shelldrake duck, a fish feeder frequenting the shores of Whitefish Bay” (p. 510).
18. j: This village “was first settled by Poles in 1906 and they gave it the name of one of their kings, John Sobieski” (pp. 521-522).
19. p: “Wenona was the mother of Hiawatha in Henry Longfellow’s poem” (p. 590).
20. b: “[A]t a meeting held to decide upon a permanent name, Judge Woodward suggested that of the Greek war of independence hero, General Demetrius Ypsilanti” (p. 618).

About the Author

William J. Vande Kopple (vkop@calvin.edu) is Professor of English at Calvin College, where he teaches courses in linguistics, language education, and secondary English education. He has published about English education, functional sentence perspective, metadiscourse, and the style of scientific prose. Recently he has also published *The Catch*, a collection of stories about family adventures with fishing.