

## LANGUAGE IN ITS SOCIO-PHYSICAL CONTEXT

DIS516 — July 2002

There are ties between physical space, social relationships, and language usage. An early task of sojourners is to learn “the lay of the land” both as they see it and as the inhabitants see it and talk about it. Language mastery requires locally-acceptable talk about spaces and places.

### Assumption

Local people will have in their language words and phrases for the physical features that are culturally important to them. Furthermore, their meanings and usage of terms will not correspond exactly to those of cartographers and geographers.

### Assignment

(1) Draw a map of the community, town or territory that you believe is your primary language-learning place. (2) Ask others to draw maps of their community or territory, then to name and describe the features they drew. (3) Learn from local people what they call the various features drawn on your map and which they do not talk about. (4) Make notes on the social functions and cultural meanings of the place that are important to local people.

### Purpose of the Assignment

(1) To learn to live in the community and on the land in ways that will serve your purposes while gaining social insight and linguistic skill in using and travelling on the land. (2) “To show those things that affect human relationships and channel how humans move within the area.”\* (3) If you intend to change customary land usage, then you will be well served to introduce innovations in terms that will have meaning to the population that must accept, reject or modify your ideas.

### Important Elements

- Natural & human-made features, habitations, boundaries, divisions, distances.
- Native categories of soils, plants, formations, and how they determine land ownership and usage.
- Local insights into what is useful and what is culturally significant.
- Local units of measurement related to land and distances.
- Language, ethnic, class and economic community boundaries.

### Suggested First Steps

1. First make a sketch of the natural terrain.
2. Note relative locations of visible features.
3. Use your own natural pace to measure distances.
4. Ask local inhabitants to draw maps and explain them to you.
5. Label features important to people in their language.
6. Ask about the boundaries and divisions of which they are aware.

### Suggested Second Steps

- Note regular and periodic movements of persons, products and spirits within the terrain.
- Note historical conflicts and conquests.
- Trace ethnic, linguistic, social and cultural distributions and boundaries.
- Soil types, plant species, animal habitats.
- Special land and space usage, pollution and contamination.
- Areas and locations of economic, political, religious, and ethnic importance.

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\* Julia Crante and Michael V. Angrosino, *Field Projects in Anthropology*, 3d ed (Prospect Heights: Waveland Press, 1992), 37