Experimental cognitive toponymy: A new approach to understanding the origins of place-names

David R. Simmons, Leslie Spence
University of Glasgow
David.Simmons@glasgow.ac.uk

Research in place-name studies tends to focus on linguistic and historical aspects of the chosen toponyms. In *cognitive* toponymy, however, we focus instead on the role of cognitive psychology (i.e. perception, memory and learning) in these choices. Our particular interest is in the role of visual perception – the way things look – on place names. It has been argued, for example, that early English place-names represent highly nuanced descriptions of landscape features, revealing a vocabulary more subtly differentiated than present-day English (Gelling & Cole, 2000, *The Landscape of Place-Names*). A more modern example is the array of names given to the rock formations in the Grand Canyon, such as "The Alligator", "Diana Temple" and "The Battleship". Why is it that certain names are chosen, and persist, while others are not? An approach to investigating this question is to perform experiments where human observers are asked to describe, or name, photographs of geographical features. These descriptions are recorded and then compared to existing names in order to explore the relationship with historical names. In our research so far, conducted with 19 young observers describing 60 pictures of landscapes, it has been remarkable how persistent colour terms are, featuring approximately 60% more often in descriptions than the next most common category, geographical classification (e.g. "hill", "mountain", "cliff", "ridge"), and more than twice as much as the other common categories: composition ("dusty", "rocky", "scree"), shape (body parts, animals, geometric), slope ("flat", "steep"), texture ("bumpy", "jagged", "smooth") and vegetation ("grassy", "mossy", "forested"). Whilst obviously limited by the lack of historical context and the limited range of images available (which to some extent determines the descriptions chosen), this method allows us to begin to unravel the cognitive processes which underlie place-name decisions. Furthermore, by combining these data with historical contextual information, such as the locations of viewpoints, the structure of the landscape at the time of naming and the known priorities of the historical namers, we can also gain insight into historical naming puzzles.