

Teacher Notes

Making a Map of Placename Regions

(Adapted from ARGWorld Activity F – Association of American Geographers)

Big question

How do we get information and develop conclusions about the colonial era in Latin America?

Focus questions

What are language indicators, and how can they help us to classify placenames?

How can we use the skill of regionalizing to make a map of areas that have similar placenames?

How can a map of placename regions help us answer questions about cultural diversity, official languages, and the problems of governing in places where people speak several languages?

Learner outcomes and curricular links

After doing this Activity, a student should be able to:

- 1) classify placenames according to the languages of the major colonial powers;
- 2) divide an area into regions based upon placenames;
- 3) appreciate that placenames and regional boundaries often persist even when land ownership or political jurisdiction changes. For that reason, placenames can provide insights into the history of an area; they can also provide guidance for people who are trying to solve modern problems.

This Activity can fit in a unit on the geography or history of Latin America. It can also fit a unit on cultural geography, colonial history, or language arts.

Requirements and resources

One class period: students do the map with all the placenames on it,

Two class periods: divide the task and do separate maps with different sets of names,

Three periods: extend by looking at placenames in their local community or other parts of the world.

Transparencies:

1. Toponym - definition of placename
2. the word “saint” in different languages (as on activity background handout)
3. some generic placenames (from activity background handout table)
4. map of Louisiana with placenames from several languages
5. map of a colonial region with no placenames
6. same map with names of mountains
7. same map with names of rivers
8. same map with names of towns
9. same map with names of mountains, rivers, and towns
10. same map with modern political borders

The ARGWorld CD unit on Placenames can be used as an introduction (it is set in Switzerland, in order to explain the skill of placename regionalization without giving away the location of the Activity, which some teachers like to present as a mystery to be solved as well as a map to be interpreted).

Other related ARGWorld CD units include Hyderabad (section on placenames in South Asia), Pulaski Road (interpreting signs along a street in Chicago), Languages in the Past (spread of languages in Africa), Regions in Africa and Micro-Regions of Cancun (about the process of dividing an area into regions).

Classroom procedures

- 1) Get student attention with questions about placenames. If desired, run the CD unit on Placenames, which deals with toponyms in different languages in Switzerland.
- 2) Hand out the Activity Map and ask students to find any placenames that they think are English, French, Spanish, or whatever other languages they may happen to know well.
- 3) Conduct class discussion about generic placenames, such as physical features (bay, river, mountains, etc.) or town names (Saint, Ville, Port, etc.). If desired, hand out the page of background and language clues for students to read, or show the CD unit or use transparencies to help guide the discussion.
- 4) Have students examine the map, identify placenames that they think are Dutch, English, French, Native, Portuguese, or Spanish, and mark them with letters: D, E, F, N, P, S.
- 5) Show the transparency with modern political borders, or have students try to identify the area shown by the map: it shows northern South America, where four European powers left different imprints on the landscape; it also is a region with some of the richest deposits of aluminum ore in the world. For that reason, the political borders and other legacies of past colonialism have an impact on present-day economies.

Alternative procedures

Ask students what they can learn from a generic but language-specific placename, such as Round Lake, Deep Gap, or Newport (the ARGUS CD has a short section about “Newport” in a unit on the Erie Canal).

In some cases, the answer is “not much” – placenames are not always chosen to describe an area. For example, “Newport” could mean “not-old place to land a boat,” OR it could just mean that a family named Newport decided to stop here and build a town. In other cases, the placenames in an area can provide valuable clues about the people who were there at the time the places were named (or, in some cases, renamed!).

This Activity can also be started:

- by asking students to think of places that had been renamed (for example, many cities have streets that were renamed after Martin Luther King shortly after his death.) Why do you think people wanted to rename those streets?
- by describing the arrival of some Spanish conquistadors in the New World. What did these people do? (give thanks, fight, steal, negotiate, run . . . and give names to features they see!)
- by organizing small groups, giving each group a handful of names from different languages, and asking them to put them into categories of similar names. Try to get students to think about what kinds of criteria they would use if the goal were to make a classification that might be useful in trying to “read” the history of a region through the names.

Progress check (a non-intrusive way to see whether students are on the right track)

Ask students to write a large D, E, F, N, P, or S directly on specific places on a map. That gives you an easy way to see if students “get it,” since their work can be seen and evaluated from quite a distance. This kind of “remote sensing” is even easier if they are encouraged to use color markers.

Historical setting of the activity

This is not a hypothetical situation – the maps show the northern coast of South America. The maps are untitled because some teachers treat the identity of the place as a “mystery” to heighten student interest. Others have students compare their regional maps with a political map of South America to see how accurately their borders coincide with the actual borders. The abundance of native-language placenames in the interior suggests that colonial influence was mainly near the coast. The colonial borders are still important, since this region has valuable aluminum mines.

Evaluation

It is important to focus on students’ logic and the plausibility of their reasons, not just on whether they classified places correctly. It is possible to have good reasons for putting a place in the “wrong” group. Moreover, linguistic clues can sometimes be ambiguous. For example, *Saint* could be either English or French, but *Sainte* could not, because English does not have a different spelling for the feminine form of nouns like this. Likewise, the feminine-gender *Santa* does not discriminate between Spanish and Portuguese, whereas the masculine form *San* and *São* are clearly distinguishable.

Concluding the Activity

The summary should focus on three major points, each with an important consequence:

- 1) Placenames were usually assigned by people who thought they had (or were trying to claim) ownership of an area or political jurisdiction over it. For that reason, placenames can often tell us which people had control of an area.
- 2) Placenames often persist even when land ownership or political jurisdiction changes. For that reason, placenames can tell us about the history of a place, particularly those places where European or other colonial powers asserted control at some time in the past.
- 3) Efforts to change placenames often reveal changes in the political economy of an area. For that reason, disputes over placenames often indicate more fundamental disagreements about other issues too.

Extension and enrichment

Many other parts of the world can be examined through the “lens” of placename analysis. Good candidates include India and Pakistan, the islands of the Caribbean Sea, the ancient empires of China, the coasts of Malaysia and Indonesia, or parts of East or Southwest Africa. To do those areas, it may be necessary to add columns to the data table. This is a good use of the Internet, since there are on-line translation dictionaries for most common languages (and some quite uncommon ones!)

Students can analyze placenames at several scales. This activity is at a “sub-continental” scale, but the same skill can work with streets in a city – the names of streets, parks, and shops often provide clues about the people who lived there, the aspirations of the builders, and the politics of the city when the neighborhood was built. See the extension activity pages for more ideas.

Frequently asked questions about placenames

Student: How do I know whether this place was named after a town in the Netherlands?

(Mistaken response: "You should check if it is on the list in the Instructions, or if it is in the dictionary or atlas. Look under Holland or Netherlands." (These are not bad suggestions, but they tend to reinforce the notion that there is "a right answer." The preferred strategy is to urge students to be persuaded by the weight of evidence rather than a single fact.)

Redirection: Why not put a question mark by that one and check other places? If you see a lot of other Dutch words in the surrounding area, it's more likely that the name you found is of Dutch origin.

Student: Is there any other way to check?

Teacher: It's always possible to argue backwards, by excluding answers that are not likely. Does this name sound like it might be Spanish or Portuguese?

Is it reasonable to expect students to be able to identify the language origins of all placenames they may encounter?

No, of course not! It's not even reasonable to expect adults to recognize more than a few of the 6000 languages in the world. But the mere fact that it is impossible to learn them all does not mean that students should deprive themselves of the pleasure of recognizing some common language indicators in the names of people and places! The goal of this Activity is to gain a basic level of familiarity with the skill of placename analysis by applying it (with some guidance) in a part of the world where different origins of placenames is obvious.

Where else can we use this skill?

In a telephone book, cemetery, war memorial, urban street, or group of restaurants.

What are some other language indicators?

Different alphabets, or extra marks over or under some letters – æ ç ô ù ÿ etc.

What are some other places in the world where language indicators are obvious?

Caribbean islands – effects of the same colonial activities observed in northern South America

South Asia (-garh means fort, -abad indicates a Muslim settlement).

China – look for regions where rivers are named –ho (a northern dialect) as opposed to –jiang (southern dialect)

How long do language indicators last?

Until people want to change them! In fact, whenever people want to change placenames, it is usually an indication of some other condition that might be worth exploring in that general area. For example, look at the locations of all the streets that are named after Martin Luther King in the United States. Or the flurry of placename changes in Russia, Eastern Europe, or Central Asia, as people in those countries try to reclaim a pre-Soviet identity.

Placenames

Glossary of key terms

(Adapted from ARGWorld Activity F)

- Board of Geographic Names:** United States government agency that has responsibility of keeping track of placenames and approving new ones
- Colonial Era:** a period in history when many European countries claimed land and started colonies in Africa, America, and many other places around the world
- colony:** territory claimed by a country; most parts of North and South America were claimed as colonies by various European countries in the centuries after Columbus
- conquistador:** Spanish word for “conqueror;” the conquistadors went out to claim other lands for the Spanish Crown in the centuries after Columbus
- dialect:** part of a bigger language but different in some ways; in some cases, people can have trouble understanding people who speak a different dialect of the same language
- ethnic group:** group of people who share a common ancestry, language, and place of origin (see the CD unit on Pulaski Road: A Bus Trip through Chicago’s Ethnic Politics)
- generic placename:** word that a language uses for a typical landscape feature, such as a river, lake, or mountain; saying “Sahara Desert” or “Rio Grande River” is therefore wrong, because “Sahara” means “desert” and “Rio” means “river” in the language of the people who named those places
- Germanic languages:** a language group that includes German, English, Dutch, Danish, and other languages based on ancient Teutonic language
- language indicators:** groups of letters that are used in only a few languages and therefore are indicators that a word might have come from those languages; for example, Dutch names often include the syllable “van” and some unique combinations of vowels (aa, oe, etc.); a name like “van Raalte” thus has two Dutch language indicators
- literacy rate:** the percentage of the adult and school-age population that is able to read
- official language:** the language or languages a country uses to conduct its official business; the official languages of Brazil is Portuguese, even though Spanish, French, English, and several native languages are spoken in specific areas
- pidgin:** simplified language often used by people who speak different languages but get together occasionally to trade or for other reasons
- renaming:** giving a new name to a place, often to help erase a bad memory
- Romance languages:** a language group consisting of Spanish, French, Italian, Portuguese, Rumanian, and other languages that are based on Latin;
- Saint (Sainte, Santa, San, São):** word used by the Catholic Church to describe holy people; many places in North and South America are named for various saints, because many early explorers were Catholic missionaries
- toponym:** placename; “topo” is Latin for “place” and “nym” is Latin for “name” (see the CD unit on placenames)