Title: Landscape and Spatial Reference: Variation across three communities of Isthmus Zapotec speakers

Keywords: Linguistics; Cultural Geography; Ethnophysiography; Zapotec

Abstract:

How does local landscape influence descriptions of small-scale space? To answer this question I combine a large-scale analysis of spatial reference practices with ethnophysiographic studies in three communities of Zapotec speakers in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in Oaxaca, Mexico: La Ventosa, subject to particularly strong “Tehuano” winds; Juchitán de Zaragoza, the urban center of the Isthmus; and Santa María Xadani, located on the Laguna Superior, with a salient hill situated in the middle of town. Data from a task describing three-dimensional objects in small-scale space show that speakers vary across communities in their use of spatial reference frames (strategies for locating or orienting objects based on the axes of speakers’ bodies, environmental features, or the objects themselves). Speakers in La Ventosa and Xadani show a strong preference for spatial reference frames anchored to the North-South winds and the rising and setting sun, while speakers in Juchitán use more frames anchored to landmarks such as their neighbors’ houses and the bodies of nearby individuals. These differences are reflected in responses to a word association task, where speakers were asked to name things that are “part of the environment, like ‘hill’, ‘river’, and ‘forest’”, responses which reflect the local landscape of each community: the strong wind (a physiographic cue) in La Ventosa, the nearby ocean in Xadani, or a general lack of salient landscape features in urban Juchitán. Together, these studies show that landscape affects community-specific linguistic practices by influencing selection of anchors of spatial descriptions in small-scale space.