

The Sociolinguistics of the “S-Word”: Squaw in American Placenames

William Bright

University of Colorado

Placenames containing the word “squaw” are numerous throughout the United States, but have recently become controversial. American Indian groups and individuals have presented three kinds of argument against the use of the term. The first argument is that it is derived from an Mohawk word for the female genitalia. Linguistic data show, however, that it is actually a New England Massachusetts word for ‘woman’. A second argument presented is that “squaw” has been, and is still, used derogatorily by whites toward Indian women. This argument is supported only weakly by literary documents, but more strongly by frontier memoirs and journalistic writing. The third argument is that “squaw” is offensive to Indians, in the same way that “nigger” is offensive to African Americans. This raises, then, the question of “politically correct” vocabulary, or in broader terms, the sociolinguistic question of the ideological values associated with words; in this context, subjective associations are as important as objective ones.

Introduction

In July 1998, when I was in Tokyo, I was surprised to see in the English-language *Japan Times* the headline: “‘Squaw’ Peak keeps its name.” The article, credited to United Press International and datelined Phoenix, reported that the Arizona State Board on Geographic and Historic Names had voted unanimously to refuse a request from American Indian petitioners that a mountain near Phoenix, named Squaw Peak, be renamed Iron Mountain, a name by which it had been supposedly known prior to 1910. The petitioners had claimed that the word “squaw” was derived from a Mohawk word for the female genitalia, and that it was considered degrading by Indians.

When I returned to the United States, I learned that versions of the same news item had been published in newspapers all over the nation,

and perhaps the world. It occurred to me that this may well have been the widest publicity ever given to a U.S. placename issue. Because of my own interest in placenames (Bright 1993; 1998), and because I am currently compiling a dictionary of U.S. placenames of Indian origin, I began to collect further information, first, about government placenaming policy, second, about specific movements to replace “squaw” placenames, and third, about the reasons for making such changes.

Government Policy

My understanding of U.S. policy is as follows: people can give whatever name they wish to their private property; local jurisdictions—such as cities, counties, or school districts—can give whatever names they wish to artificial features such as streets, airports, or schools. However, assignment of names to natural features, and specifically the placename usage on federal documents, including the widely used topographic maps of the U.S. Geological Survey, depends on approval by the United States Board on Geographic Names. When the U.S. Board considers the assignment of new placenames or the change of old ones, it relies heavily on recommendations from local bodies, including state placename authorities in those states where they exist. Thus, if the Arizona State Board had approved the name change for Squaw Peak, their recommendation would have been forwarded to the U.S. Board for further deliberation and action.

In the past, the U.S. Board has occasionally made blanket changes of words considered offensive; thus in 1967 they directed that 143 placenames with “nigger” should be changed to “negro,” and 26 placenames with the word “Jap” should be switched to “Japanese” (Schmitt 1996). However, the Board’s current policy with regard to “squaw” names is to consider changes only on a place-by-place basis, when recommended by local authorities; petitioners are encouraged to propose local Indian names when known, or names related to Indian history, specifically to Indian women. At present there are more than one thousand natural or artificial locales in the United States whose names include “squaw”, and the Board has already approved changes in a few cases.

Local efforts to replace “squaw” placenames have been made in several parts of the U.S., and as of June 2000 they had been passed into law in three states: Minnesota, Montana, and Maine. I will summarize information here only from Minnesota and Arizona.

The Minnesota Case

In 1995, in response to demands of Indians, Minnesota enacted a law ordering counties to rename natural geographic places identified by the word “squaw.” As a result, a name like Squaw Lake in St. Louis County officially became Nokomis Lake Pond in county and state records; the specific term is Ojibwa for ‘grandmother’, and is of course well known as the name of Hiawatha’s grandmother in Longfellow’s 1855 poem, *The Song of Hiawatha*. However, officials of Lake County, on the Canadian border, initially refused to comply; they said that the changes would cost tens of thousands of dollars for new maps. To be sure, the white officials did offer to rename Squaw Creek and Squaw Lake as Politically Correct Creek and Politically Correct Lake. Local Indians said that the county’s attitude was arrogant and disrespectful. Larry Aitken, a Chippewa tribal historian, observed that “It’s equivalent to having the New York Mets called the New York Jews.” Glen Yakel, who, as the administrator of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, is in charge of placenaming, commented that “[The Indians] are trying to bill this as a matter of political correctness, but it’s a matter of civility” (Schmitt 1996). However, by September 1999 the replacement of all “squaw” names had been fully implemented in the state.

The Arizona Case

There are said to be 73 “squaw” placenames in Arizona, the best known of which is Squaw Peak in north central Phoenix, in Maricopa County. Since 1992, Rep. Jack Jackson, a Navajo member of the Arizona legislature, has repeatedly introduced a bill to allow for the renaming of Squaw Peak, but the change has been strongly opposed by city and state governments and business leaders (Chavers 1997). Thus Phoenix Councilwoman Frances Emma Barwood is quoted (Mayes 1995) as saying that the constant brouhaha over names pre-empts more serious business: “I think it’s totally silly and frivolous. People are just becoming too politically correct—it’s getting to the point of ridiculousness.” Comment on the other side has come from anthropologist Michael Winkelman of Arizona State University, who has been quoted as saying that Anglo-Americans are notorious for their insensitivity to cultures outside their own: “I guess [Indians] are trying to legislate what should be common-sense consideration. We don’t learn sensitivity in this country.” Rep. Jackson in turn has said that he’s tired of hearing people

say there are more important issues confronting Indian people: "How would they know? You don't know the way it feels until you're Native American and have a family" (Kossan 1996).

In 1997, two young women members of the Youth Group of the Arizona branch of the American Indian Movement (AIM) felt encouraged by events in Minnesota. They filed a proposal with the State Board, asking that the name of Squaw Peak be changed to Iron Mountain (CDR 1997), emphasizing the offensiveness of the name in use. They claimed that *Iron Mountain* was a translation of the traditional name used by the Akamel O'odham or Pima tribe, namely *Vinum Dwaug*—more accurately, *Vainom Du'ag* or *Do'ag*—which had been preserved in oral tradition.

Subsequently the history and usage of the names were researched by staff of the State Board (Hoff 1998a; 1998b; 1998c). It was noted that a 1997 book by Donald Bahr, the principal anthropological authority on the Pima—co-authored with two Pima elders—states that *Vainom Du'ag* is the traditional Pima name not of the mountain currently called Squaw Peak, but of one about four miles to the northeast. Furthermore, Pima elder Lloyd Paul, who was Bahr's co-author, stated that *Vainom Du'ag*, 'iron peak', is not the same as Squaw Peak, for which he knew no Indian name.

In July 1998, after several months of public discussion, the State Board met to decide on the proposal. The Board noted that there is doubt whether the peak called Iron Mountain by the Pima is in fact the one called Squaw Peak by whites. After discussion, the Board voted unanimously against changing the name of Squaw Peak to Iron Mountain; however, they left open the possibility for another proposal to change the name of Squaw Peak to something else (Arizona 1998c).

Reasons for Change

Protests against use of the word "squaw" are associated with two other kinds of linguistic activism. One is the protest against several English terms that are or have been used to refer to American Indians, including "buck" and "brave" for an adult male, "papoose" for a child, and "redskin" as a generic term; in many cases, protests have been made specifically against the use of such terms as names for athletic teams. Another link is to the protest by feminists against terms considered either degrading or patronizing to women in general, such as "chick," "babe," or "girl" when applied to adult women. It is clear that

the word “squaw” comes under fire from both these viewpoints. Several types of reason have been, or can be, brought forward against the use of the term; I suggest that these can be based on several factors: etymology, semantics, phonetics, historical usage, and present-day attitudes.

Etymology

All linguists who have commented on the word “squaw,” including specialists on American Indian languages and on the history of American English vocabulary, agree that it is not derived from Mohawk, or any Iroquoian language related to it. Rather, the word was borrowed as early as 1624 from Massachusetts, the language of an Algonquian people in the area we now call Massachusetts; in that language it meant simply ‘young woman’ (Cutler 1994; Goddard 1996; 1997). Related words meaning ‘woman’ continue to be used in the many Algonquian languages of North America: Cree /*iskwe:w*/, Ojibwa /*ikwe*/, Fox /*ihkwe:wa*/, Unami Delaware /*xkwé:*/, Munsee Delaware /*óxkwe:w*/, all derived from a prototype */*eθkwe:wa*/ (Goddard 1996). Some Algonquian languages have words for ‘woman’ that do not superficially resemble “squaw,” but in fact related terms occur in all languages of the family, though often modified by phonetic changes; e.g., in Arapaho, an Algonquian language of the Plains states, the word *híthei*, ‘woman’, can be traced, sound by sound, to the same prehistoric source (Goddard 1998)

The Mohawk language, by contrast, belongs to an entirely different language family—the Iroquoian—and the Mohawk word for ‘female genitalia is *ots’skwa?*, pronounced approximately [*oj’skwa?*] (Mithun 1998). Historically, the Mohawk and the Massachusetts were geographically, culturally, and linguistically quite separate. The earliest publishing reference to the supposed Mohawk origin is by Sanders and Peck (1973, 184). Subsequently the idea was given wide circulation by a statement made on TV in 1992 by the Indian spokesperson Suzan Harjo, who attributed the usage to “French and British fur-trappers.” As Goddard says (1997): “The resemblance that might be perceived between “squaw’ and the last syllable of the Mohawk word is coincidental.... I suppose someone might claim that the meanings of these words are similar, but to do that would be to adopt the viewpoint that those ‘fur-trappers’ are being accused of.” Goddard has further noted (1996) that present-day Mohawk speakers do not identify the English word “squaw” with any word in their language.

However, findings of linguists and lexicographers may have had little influence on popular belief. The supposed Mohawk etymology has been repeated constantly in publications by Indian organizations, and various Indian writers have raised the question: "How would whites feel if they had to live in a place called Vagina Valley?" Furthermore, it has been pointed out by several commentators that more important factors should be historical and current usage, not etymology. For example, both "negro" and "nigger" derive from the innocuous Spanish *negro*, 'black', but the English term "nigger" has long been considered especially offensive. As Dave Denomie, an Ojibwa from Wisconsin, has written (1998): "This is more a simple question of regarding others with courtesy and respect than it is a question of etymology, or whether or not the use of that word offends some, most, or all Indians."

Semantics

It is noteworthy that the English word "squaw" belongs to a rather special semantic set. It may be significant that the semantic Indian set: "buck," "squaw," "papoose" is unusual among terms for ethnic groups, in that it has separate lexical items to distinguish male, female, and young; this pattern seems to group Indians with animals (e.g., horse: stallion, mare, colt) rather than with other human groups (cf. Italian: Italian man, Italian woman, Italian child). Note that the word "buck" is otherwise used to refer to various male animals, especially the deer.

Phonetics

As the lexicographer Leslie Dunkling has said (1994): "Who would want to be linked phonetically to squalid, squat, squall, squander, squash, squawk, squeak, squeal, squeamish, squelch, squint, squirm, squirt?" It is probably not accidental that, in some derogatory citations of the term "squaw," it is specifically linked with words like squat and squint. Against the above list, we have only a few neutral terms beginning with "squ," e.g., squad and square.

Historical Usage

An important argument presented by Indian activists against "squaw" is that it has historically been used by whites in an abusive sense toward Indian women. To be sure, there is much historical evidence of generalized racism directed against American Indians, and of derogatory language use in particular (well summarized by Curran 1997). However, documented uses of the word "squaw" in clearly

derogatory reference to American Indian women seem to have been neglected by lexicographers. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "squaw" simply as "a North American Indian woman or wife," and gives seven examples, from 1634 to 1877, which use the term in a neutral sense.

Nevertheless, historical examples can be cited. Just as feminist writers have shown that American men have often imposed a "virgin vs. whore" dichotomy on women, so Green (1975) also notes that nineteenth century American writers tended to classify Indian women either as "Indian princesses" or as "squaws," the latter being routinely characterized as ugly and whorish. Thus James Fenimore Cooper's 1826 novel, *The Last of the Mohicans*, refers to "the crafty 'squaw'...the squalid and withered person of this hag" (Cooper 1983, 239). In 1883, the memoirs of Lt. James W. Steele (1883, 84) referred to "the universal 'squaw'—squat, angular, pig-eyed, ragged, wretched, and insect-haunted." It would seem appropriate to search not only "literary" works and personal memoirs of the period, but popular "dime novels" as well.

In the early twentieth century, we find further evidence of the term in a derogatory sense; thus Weseen (1928, 603) labeled "squaw" as "a contemptuous name." However, the twentieth century also saw the beginning of protests against the word. In 1929, Britton Davis, an academic biographer of Geronimo, wrote (xxix): "I deplore the use of the designations 'buck' and 'squaw' for the men and women of our North American Indians...." In more recent decades, protests against "squaw" have been numerous. Among many statements by present-day Indians, I find one especially moving: a letter written to the Arizona State Board by Joe Morgen, a member of the Owens Valley Paiute Band of California (Arizona 1998b): "I am an old man.... I grew up with the 'S' word.... I heard white men refer to my mother that way and I was ashamed of her. I didn't quite understand, but I knew that she was less than nothing or they would have never made that comment. My mother used to actually apply bleach to her face so she would look whiter and gain more acceptance."

Current Attitudes

Perhaps the most important assertion made by Indian activists is that, here and now, the word "squaw" is offensive to many Indians, in the same way that the term "nigger" is offensive to African Americans. Just as the term "nigger" has been banned from U.S. placenames for some years by government policy, Indian groups argue that "squaw"

should be subject to similar action. However, many whites have denied that the term carries any negative sense at the present time. It has also been stated by some Indians that the term is not currently used in their areas and that they do not find it offensive as a placename. Most current dictionaries of English usage, such as those published by Random House and by Merriam-Webster, do label "squaw" as "disparaging," and Indian activists have pointed to this labeling as authoritative. This of course raises the question of "politically correct" or "incorrect" vocabulary—or in broader terms, the sociolinguistic question of the ideological values associated with words; in this context, subjective associations are as important as objective ones. Thus, even though members of some Indian tribes report that they do not find the word offensive, it can be argued that official naming practice, like that established by the federal and state placename boards, should allow no room for terms that give offense in minority communities. It is a commonplace of sociolinguistics that attitudes toward language, even if based on misapprehensions of fact, are themselves facts—"things people know that ain't so," as the nineteenth century humorist Artemus Ward put it (Bright 1978), and are just as important as actual usage. I therefore support the efforts by Indian activists to eliminate "squaw" from official maps. But we don't need "sociolinguistic" reasons for doing this; considerations of simple courtesy are enough.

To put matters bluntly, the derogatory use of "squaw" has a background in racism, and racism is a continuing fact in American society. Eliminating the word from maps is a good idea, and may make a small dent in racist thinking, but it will not affect the larger phenomenon of racial prejudice. One Minnesotan from Squaw Lake has been quoted (Schmitt 1996) as saying that it was fine with him to change the name, but he did not expect some people to change their habits: "It's the way you say it, it's not the word."

The Pueblo Indian poet and literary scholar Paula Gunn Allen, who was born and raised in New Mexico, goes to the heart of the matter. She has written that "The only derogatory name I can think of...is Indian, as in 'You know how those Indians are,' or 'He's an Indian'.... In tone and demeanor it's a word of contempt, dismissal, stereotype, discount, denigration.... Another [such term] I hear/heard a lot was they and them.... Anyone who has lived in Indian country can recall hearing Anglos say, 'Oh, he's one of them.'" Allen continues: "Come to think of it, there was another derogatory term used for Navajos, and that was Navajo" (1997).

What can scholars do about this? We can present the public with the facts of etymology, of history, and of current usage. We can refute people who muddy the waters with false or misleading statements in any of these areas; but we can also affirm that human beliefs and feelings, whatever their origins, are themselves facts, and need to be taken into account. As citizens, furthermore, we can and should fight racism, whether it is displayed in words, deeds, or covert ideology.

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