

Referential Semantics of Coastal Toponyms: A Case Study Central Java

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Abstract

Toponymy is a branch of linguistics that examines the interrelationship between language, culture, and environment through place naming. In coastal regions, place names often reflect geographical features, natural elements, and community perceptions of their surroundings. This study aims to uncover the referential meanings embedded in coastal toponyms by employing a referential semantics approach. The analysis interprets the relationship between the linguistic form of each toponym and its real-world referent, while classifying naming motivations using the Australian National Placenames Survey (ANPS) typology. The findings reveal that referential meanings predominantly represent denotative and ecological relations, indicating that coastal toponyms are grounded in physical and environmental features. This is evident from the dominance of the Descriptive category (50.0%), followed by the Associative (20.5%) and Evaluative (15.9%) categories. These categories reflect not only geographical and ecological characteristics but also cultural associations and value-laden expressions embedded in naming practices. Beyond its theoretical contribution, this study offers practical implications for cultural heritage preservation. The analysis of semantic motivations behind place naming can serve as a linguistic foundation for documenting traditional toponyms, supporting local government efforts to standardize and preserve place names, and strengthening intangible cultural heritage initiatives in coastal communities. The findings also highlight the need to safeguard environmentally based toponyms that encode ecological knowledge, particularly in areas undergoing environmental change and urban development.

Keywords: Referential semantics; Toponymy; Coastal areas; Australian national placename survey

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INTRODUCTION

Toponymy is a subfield of linguistics that examines place names as symbolic, cultural, and ecological representations of the relationship between language and the lived environment. Place naming is never arbitrary; instead, it reflects how communities cognitively categorize, socially negotiate, and culturally articulate their spatial experiences. Within the framework of anthropological linguistics, Duranti (1997) argues that language functions simultaneously as "a cultural resource and a cultural practice," shaping and transmitting the social knowledge embedded within a community. Similarly, Foley (1997) demonstrates that linguistic practices are deeply rooted in sociocultural structures and value systems. Contemporary studies Mulyadi et al. (2025) further support the understanding of toponyms as cultural memory markers linguistic sites where ecological, historical, and social experiences are preserved. Thus, toponymy can be conceptualized as a linguistic archive, documenting how human groups narrate and legitimize their interactions with landscapes.

Within referential semantics, a toponym encodes a triadic relationship between the linguistic sign, conceptual meaning, and the external referent it designates. This notion aligns with Lyons (1977) and Palmer (1981), who emphasize the referential dimension of meaning as grounded in real-world entities and perceptual experience. In the context of place naming, referential meaning emerges through the empirical and perceptual engagements between communities and their environments. More recent works such as Muñoz (2019) highlight the cognitive significance of proper nouns and their role in organizing environmental knowledge, spatial reasoning, and cultural perception. These findings underscore that toponyms are not merely linguistic labels but cognitive-referential expressions that reflect how communities conceptualize ecological features.

In coastal regions, the referential dimension of toponyms becomes particularly salient. Coastal environments often possess distinctive geomorphological and ecological characteristics estuaries, mangroves, tidal systems, fisheries, and river networks that shape the behavioral, economic, and perceptual ecology of local communities. Consequently, coastal toponyms frequently emerge from descriptive or associative references to environmental conditions, topographical forms, hydrological systems, or resource-based activities. This pattern is evident across Java's northern coastline, especially in Demak Regency, where numerous village names contain lexical elements such as *kali* 'river', *tlogo* 'lake', *kedung* 'water pool', and *betok* 'muddy soil'. These toponyms manifest what Fill and Mühlhäusler (2001) term ecological linguistic semiosis a process through which language encodes human interactions with ecological environments. Comparative studies from Southeast Asia (Amelia et al, 2025), and from Sumatra (Triana et al, 2022;Triana et al, 2022a) likewise demonstrate that coastal societies consistently embed environmental knowledge and ecological categorization within their naming practices.

The field of toponymy has seen significant advancement in the last decade, with research spanning descriptive linguistics, etymology, sociocultural studies, cognitive linguistics, and spatial anthropology. In Indonesia, provide insights into linguistic landscape perspectives on place naming, while Gifyazeva & Polkina (2019) examine the semantic and cultural roles of toponyms within phraseological units. Additional studies such as Pertiwi & Astuti (2020), Pradyani (2023) and Latifatussolehah et al, (2025) have explored morphological, ethnographic, or sociocultural aspects of Indonesian place naming. However, these studies tend to prioritize historical, symbolic, or sociocultural interpretations, with limited emphasis on systematic analyses of referential meaning and its connection to ecological referents. This demonstrates an important research gap in understanding how linguistic forms encode empirical ecological relations within coastal environments.

At the regional level, linguistic studies in Demak reflect the strong connection between language and environmental interaction. Zulfa (2024) identifies ecological categorization within agricultural registers, while Zulfa and Suyanto (2022) uncover semantic and cultural dimensions in the community's traditional lexicon. Theological and morphological approaches to Indonesian place naming (Anam, 2017;Sulastri et al., 2023) further reveal the diversity of naming motivations across regions. Yet, these studies collectively show that research on toponymy in Indonesia remains fragmented and largely descriptive. The lack of attention to referential semantics particularly in coastal contexts underscores the need for an analytical framework capable of linking linguistic form, semantic content, and ecological referent.

A growing number of international scholars (Tent & Blair, 2021; Reszegi, 2020) argue that the study of place names must integrate ecological and cognitive dimensions to better understand how naming practices shape spatial identity and cultural memory. Nevertheless, the use of systematic typologies such as the Australian National Placenames Survey (ANPS) remains predominantly limited to Western contexts. By applying the

ANPS naming motivation framework comprising categories such as descriptive, associative, evaluative, indigenous, occurrent, eponymous, and linguistic innovation this study responds to the need for cross-cultural methodological expansion. Implementing ANPS within a non-Western, tropical coastal environment not only enriches global toponymic research but also demonstrates the typology's flexibility in analyzing place names grounded in distinct ecological and cultural settings.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in integrating referential semantics with ecological and anthropological frameworks. Following Haugen's (1972) ecology of language and Duranti's (1997) linguistic anthropology, the present research conceptualizes toponyms as ecological–semantic constructs: linguistic forms through which communities interpret, categorize, and inhabit their environments. Through this lens, naming becomes an epistemological act an active process through which human beings impose conceptual order upon ecological landscapes.

To address this gap, the present study focuses on the referential meanings of coastal toponyms in Demak Regency and applies the ANPS typology to classify naming motivations. Accordingly, this research investigates the following questions:

1. What referential meanings are encoded in the toponyms of coastal villages in Demak?
2. How can these toponyms be classified using the ANPS naming motivation typology?
3. What do these semantic patterns reveal about the ecological, cultural, and cognitive landscapes of coastal communities?

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design within the framework of referential semantic analysis, aiming to uncover how the linguistic forms of toponyms correspond to their real-world referents in coastal environments. A qualitative approach is appropriate because it enables an in-depth interpretation of meaning as embedded in the social, cultural, and ecological contexts of the speech community (Creswell, 2014; Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, 2018). Qualitative inquiry is inherently interpretive, emphasizing the reconstruction of meaning through linguistic practice rather than mere classification of surface-level linguistic structures. Within this paradigm, language is viewed as a symbolic system through which human experiences of the environment are conceptualized and encoded.

The research design is descriptive–interpretive, which, following Moleong (2013) allows the factual description of linguistic phenomena while also interpreting the meanings that emerge from their contextual use. This study analyzes the referential meanings of coastal toponyms and their connections to geographical, ecological, and cultural realities. To classify naming motivations systematically, the research adopts the Australian National Placenames Survey (ANPS) typology proposed by Tent & Blair (2021) which categorizes toponyms into seven types: descriptive, associative, occurrent, evaluative, copied, eponymous, and innovative. This framework enables a structured interpretation of the semantic motivations underlying coastal naming practices and how these motivations reflect the conceptual systems of local communities.

Data and Data Collection Techniques

The data consist of toponyms in the northern coastal region of Java. Data were collected using three complementary techniques: documentary analysis, semi-structured interviews, and field observation. Documentary analysis involved examining official administrative records, regional maps, and government datasets to compile a verified list of village toponyms (Sugiyono, 2006). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with community elders, cultural informants, village officials, and long-term residents to trace the etymology, naming motivations, and cultural context behind each toponym. Field

observations were carried out to confirm the physical characteristics of the environment and to validate the alignment between linguistic meaning and geographical reality. These methods allowed the research to integrate linguistic evidence, ethnographic insight, and ecological observation into a comprehensive interpretive framework.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed in three stages. Referential interpretation: Examining the relationship between linguistic forms and their referents, grounded in referential semantic theories (Lyons, 1977; Palmer, 1981). Categorical classification: Classifying each toponym using the ANPS typology to identify dominant naming motivations in coastal communities. Contextual interpretation: Interpreting the categorized meanings in relation to cultural practices, environmental conditions, and traditional ecological knowledge.

Triangulation and Data Validation

To ensure the credibility and dependability of the findings, the study employed source triangulation, method triangulation, and interpretive triangulation, each articulated clearly to strengthen the reliability of the data: Source triangulation involved cross-checking naming information across multiple sources: administrative documents, oral histories, local narratives, and environmental observations. Method triangulation compared results obtained from documentary analysis, interviews, and field observations to ensure that the semantic interpretations were consistent across different methodological approaches. Interpretive triangulation was conducted by sharing preliminary analyses with local informants and linguistic experts to validate whether the interpreted referential meanings accurately reflected community knowledge and cultural understanding.

These triangulation procedures enhance the study's credibility, authenticity, and ecological validity, ensuring that the interpretations of coastal toponyms are grounded in both empirical reality and community-based perspectives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis reveals that toponyms in coastal regions exhibit strong and consistent referential meanings, which stem from the direct relationship between linguistic forms and the physical as well as social environments in which they are used. In this context, place naming functions not merely as a geographical label, but as a representational system that records and organizes how communities perceive and conceptualize their lived spaces. Each toponym thus operates as a linguistic symbol that bridges the community's empirical experiences with its underlying cultural conceptual system.

Within the framework of referential semantics (Lyons, 1977; Palmer, 1981) this phenomenon illustrates how language functions as a cognitive medium that structures ecological experience into meaningful linguistic forms. Coastal communities employ lexical elements such as *kali* (river), *karang* (coral rock), *tlogo* (pond or lake), and *kedung* (water pool) not solely as physical descriptors, but as conceptualizations of spatial experience emerging from direct interaction with the natural environment. This demonstrates the triadic relationship between *form*, *meaning*, and *referent*, in which linguistic meaning is grounded in sensory perception of concrete geographical and ecological features.

Based on the motivational typology of the Australian National Placenames Survey (ANPS) (Tent & Blair, 2021) coastal toponyms can be classified into several primary categories descriptive, associative, and evaluative, alongside minor categories such as indigenous, occurrent, eponymous, and linguistic innovation. Each category represents a distinct referential pattern reflecting how coastal communities interpret, manage, and assign meaning to the spaces they inhabit.

The descriptive category exhibits a denotative-empirical relationship, wherein linguistic expressions directly represent natural features such as rivers, coral formations, or coastal vegetation. The associative category reflects a metonymic-conceptual relationship, where naming is motivated by association with environmental elements such as flora, fauna, or human activities. Meanwhile, the evaluative category contains a connotative-normative dimension, as communities employ language to express social values, collective aspirations, or evaluative judgments regarding a given place. The presence of minor categories such as indigenous and linguistic innovation underscores the significance of local languages and morphological creativity in shaping the coastal toponymic system.

Accordingly, the system of place naming in coastal areas can be understood as a form of ecological semiosis (Fill & Mühlhäusler, 2001; Haugen, 1972) a process in which language functions as a medium for negotiating the relationship between humans and their environment. This pattern demonstrates that toponyms are not mere geographical nomenclatures but semantic entities containing the epistemological traces of a community revealing how people recognize, classify, and make sense of their surroundings through linguistic systems. Conceptually, these findings reinforce the notion that referential semantics serves as an effective analytical framework for interpreting the interrelation between language and cultural ecology, particularly in coastal societies whose existence is deeply intertwined with natural elements.

Descriptive Category

The descriptive category represents the most dominant type of naming motivation. Toponyms with descriptive meanings generally depict the physical characteristics of a region, such as landforms, water presence, vegetation, or other environmental elements. Place names such as *Kedungmutih*, *Kalikondang*, *Tlogorejo*, and *Karangtowo* illustrate a direct relationship between the lexical element and its real-world referent. For instance, the word *kali* denotes a river one of the primary geographical features of coastal regions while *karang* describes hard, rocky terrain. Semantically, this category demonstrates a denotative and empirical referential relationship, in which language functions as a mirror of ecological reality (Lyons, 1977; Palmer, 1981). This pattern also embodies what Duranti (1997) refers to as *linguistic cognition* the process through which ecological experiences are transformed into stable linguistic signs within a community's language system.

Associative Category

The associative category involves naming motivated by symbolic relationships between places and other elements often associated with them, such as flora, fauna, or human activities. For example, *Bakung* originates from the *bakung* plant commonly found near water sources, while *Kedungori* relates to the *gori* (young jackfruit) tree, which serves as a natural landmark. This pattern reveals that referential meaning in toponyms does not merely denote physical objects but also incorporates cultural layers of meaning that connect humans to their environment through symbolic association (Foley, 1997). In this context, language functions as an ecological instrument, representing the social and environmental interactions of coastal communities with their surroundings. This finding aligns with Haugen (1972) notion of the *ecology of language*, which posits that linguistic systems operate within interdependent social and natural ecosystems.

Evaluative Category

The evaluative category reflects the emotional attitudes and value judgments of a community toward a place. Toponyms such as *Karangrejo* and *Tambrejo* contain the morpheme *rejo* ("prosperous"), which conveys positive connotations of collective well-being and social harmony. Semantically, this category demonstrates a shift from objective referential meaning to normative connotative meaning (Leech, 1981). From an

anthropological linguistic perspective, this phenomenon exemplifies what Duranti (1997) terms a *cultural act of meaning* the process by which communities frame their lived space through language as a way to assert shared values and collective identity. In this sense, place naming within this category not only records geographical facts but also represents the community's social and spiritual aspirations toward the environment they inhabit.

Beyond these three major categories, several minor categories were also identified, further enriching the coastal naming system. The indigenous category reflects the preservation of local linguistic elements such as *kedung*, *tlogo*, and *waru*, which derive from the Javanese language. This indicates the continuity of local linguistic identity and demonstrates that naming systems remain deeply rooted in regional linguistic heritage (Fill & Mühlhäusler, 2001). The occurrent category denotes names based on specific events, while the eponymous category includes names derived from historical or legendary figures, such as *Tlogoboyo*, which refers to a local folk hero. The linguistic innovation category highlights the creativity of speakers in forming new toponyms through morphemic combination, as in *Timbulsloko*, derived from *timbul* ("to rise") and *sloko* ("sea grass"), resulting in a novel linguistic formation with contextual ecological meaning.

Overall, the referential meanings of coastal toponyms reflect the intricate interconnection between language, ecology, and local culture. Place naming functions not merely as a geographical identifier but as a linguistic archive that preserves traditional ecological knowledge the community's inherited system of knowledge about space, vegetation, and natural resources across generations (Berkes, 2008). Within the framework of referential semantics, the relationship between linguistic form and its referent is empirical and perceptual, grounded in the community's sensory and cognitive experience of the surrounding landscape (Lyons, 1977; Palmer, 1981). Accordingly, the coastal toponymic system can be understood as a form of cognitive-ecological representation, wherein language maps ecological experience into stable semantic structures.

From an ecolinguistic perspective ((Fill & Mühlhäusler, 2001), the findings affirm that place naming operates within a system of ecological semantics that emerges through the ongoing interaction between humans, language, and the environment. The process of toponymization in coastal contexts reveals the ecological function of language as a cognitive mechanism for organizing perceptions of space and natural reality. Each toponym thus represents not only a linguistic unit but also a semantic entity that encapsulates the ecological and social relationships between speakers and their environment.

These findings reinforce Reszegi's (2020) argument that toponyms contribute to the formation of conceptual spatial structures. However, unlike cognitive-mapping approaches that emphasize abstract conceptualization, this study foregrounds the referential-ecological dimension, demonstrating how toponymic meanings directly mirror empirical relationships between people and their geographical surroundings. In this sense, toponymic meaning is not arbitrary but emerges from concrete sensory experiences of environmental elements such as rivers, muddy terrain, coral formations, and coastal vegetation.

This study also complements Gifyazeva & Polkina (2019), who explored toponyms in idiomatic and phraseological contexts, by showing that in tropical maritime environments, toponymic meanings are grounded more firmly in direct ecological experience than in purely symbolic linguistic associations. In doing so, this research expands the typological and geographical scope of global toponymy by contributing empirical insights from tropical coastal ecosystems an ecological zone that remains underrepresented in contemporary toponymic scholarship.

Compared with Khabibullina et al. (2022), who analyzed the pedagogical functions of toponyms in spatial literacy, this study offers a theoretical contribution by adapting the

Australian National Placenames Survey (ANPS) typology (Tent & Blair, 2021) to a tropical Indonesian context. The findings show that while the ANPS model possesses wide applicability, ecological conditions significantly shape the distribution of naming motivations. Thus, typological frameworks in toponymy benefit from ecological calibration when applied in culturally and environmentally distinct settings.

In comparison with more recent studies, this research provides a finer-grained semantic account by systematically tracing how morphemes correspond directly to ecological referents. Although those studies recognized that environments influence naming practices, they did not explicitly describe the referential mechanisms through which ecological perception becomes encoded in lexical structures. This study addresses that gap by demonstrating how coastal toponyms encode environmental knowledge through empirically grounded referential links for example Betokan 'muddy land,' Kalicilik 'small river,' or Bakung 'flora-based toponym'.

Taken together, previous research tends to emphasize cultural symbolism, cognitive mapping, or sociolinguistic functions of place names. The present findings advance the discussion by demonstrating that the semantic structure of coastal toponyms integrates ecological perception, cultural values, and linguistic categorization into a unified system of ecological referential semantics. This model highlights that linguistic units in toponymy encode not only environmental features but also ideological, evaluative, and identity-based meanings.

Beyond the local context, the findings also contribute to broader cultural, ecological, and linguistic inquiries by illustrating how toponymy serves as a cultural-ecological lens for understanding human–environment relationships. Semantic patterns found in the coastal villages of Java align with global observations that communities living in ecologically dynamic environments tend to encode environmental knowledge directly into place naming practices. Thus, referential–ecological naming is part of a broader cross-cultural pattern in which language stabilizes social memory about landscape features, seasonal cycles, and the distribution of natural resources.

These results additionally offer insights applicable to other linguistic ecologies, such as riverine systems, mountainous regions, mangrove zones, and archipelagic communities. The referential semantic framework used here can be extended to examine how environmental perceptions and cultural values are encoded in other ecologically sensitive regions such as the Mekong Delta, the Philippine coastal barangays, or South Asian river communities. This opens a comparative avenue for future studies aiming to understand how ecological conditions interact with naming systems across diverse cultural landscapes.

Beyond their descriptive contributions, the findings also carry methodological and theoretical implications. They highlight the need for integrating referential semantics with ecological linguistics to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of naming motivations. The successful application of the ANPS typology to the Indonesian coastal context suggests that cross-regional toponymic models benefit from ecological adjustment when used outside their original cultural settings. Furthermore, the study underscores the potential role of toponymic research in environmental humanities and cultural preservation efforts, particularly in documenting traditional ecological knowledge threatened by coastal erosion, urbanization, or naming standardization policies.

In sum, this research not only contributes to Indonesian toponymy but also situates its findings within a broader interdisciplinary discourse involving cultural linguistics, ecological anthropology, and linguistic geography. By demonstrating the deep interdependence of language, environment, and cultural cognition, the study lays conceptual foundations that can inform cross-linguistic comparison and future theoretical development regarding toponymic systems in diverse ecological landscapes.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that coastal toponyms function as linguistic representations of the dynamic relationship between language, environment, and local culture, embodied through their referential meanings. The referential semantic analysis shows that place names are not merely geographical labels but conceptual systems that record, organize, and transmit ecological, social, and cognitive experiences across generations. Each toponym acts as a form of ecological semiosis, in which linguistic expressions encode human perception of landscape features and project cultural values onto lived space.

Using the Australian National Placenames Survey (ANPS) classification (Tent & Blair, 2011), the study finds that descriptive and associative naming motivations dominate the coastal toponymy of northern Java. These categories indicate a direct link between lexical elements and ecological referents such as rivers, muddy terrain, vegetation, and landforms, which serve as empirical foundations for meaning construction. Meanwhile, evaluative, indigenous, and linguistic innovation categories add symbolic and identity-driven layers to the naming system, revealing the community's emotional stance, cultural heritage, and creative linguistic adaptation. Together, these categories illustrate that coastal toponymy constitutes an ecological-linguistic semiosis in which language functions simultaneously as a naming device, a cognitive model, and an epistemological bridge connecting traditional ecological knowledge with contemporary cultural understanding.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the advancement of the ecological referential semantics paradigm by demonstrating the adaptability of the ANPS typology within a tropical, agro-maritime, non-Western context. The findings confirm that referential approaches are not restricted to Western toponymic traditions but are equally effective for explaining naming systems in the Global South, where ecological conditions and sociocultural dynamics vary significantly. By integrating referential semantics with ecolinguistic perspectives, this research lays the groundwork for a more contextualized, intercultural, and environmentally grounded theory of toponymic meaning.

Methodologically, the study validates referential semantics as an effective analytical framework for exploring the triadic relationship between linguistic form, conceptual representation, and empirical referent, as outlined by Lyons (1977) and Palmer (1981). The approach enables both descriptive and interpretive mapping of how communities construct ecological perception linguistically. Its successful application to coastal place names demonstrates its broader potential for research in linguistic landscape studies, cognitive semantics, environmental discourse analysis, and cross-regional toponymy.

Practically, the findings highlight important implications for the preservation of toponymic heritage as part of regional cultural identity and ecological knowledge. Understanding the referential meanings encoded in local place names provides valuable resources for language documentation, cultural revitalization efforts, and policy initiatives aimed at safeguarding heritage in coastal regions threatened by environmental change, urban development, or naming standardization. Toponyms rooted in traditional ecological knowledge can also inform sustainable development planning, climate adaptation strategies, and culturally grounded environmental education programs, ensuring that indigenous spatial knowledge remains accessible for future generations.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, several recommendations can be proposed for the further development of linguistic research, particularly in the field of semantic toponymy. First, future studies are encouraged to expand the scope of investigation to regions with different ecological characteristics such as mountainous, inland, or urban areas in order to obtain a more comprehensive comparison of referential meaning patterns and naming motivations across cultural ecosystems.

Second, the referential semantic approach employed in this study can be integrated with cognitive semantics or cultural linguistics to explore how conceptual structures and spatial perceptions shape place-naming systems across diverse linguistic communities. Such integration would deepen the understanding of how cognitive and cultural models influence the linguistic representation of environment and space. Third, more longitudinal research is needed to examine the semantic evolution of toponyms resulting from social, economic, and ecological changes, thereby providing insights into how linguistic meaning transforms over time alongside environmental transformation.

Beyond its academic contributions, this research also carries significant practical implications. Local governments, cultural institutions, and academic communities are encouraged to collaborate in documenting and preserving local toponyms as integral components of regional linguistic heritage and ecological identity. Understanding the referential meanings of place names can inform spatial planning, culture-based tourism, and environmental education, as each toponym encapsulates vital historical and ecological representations that support the sustainability of local knowledge systems. Thus, toponymic studies not only enrich the linguistic and semantic corpus but also contribute to the preservation of the harmonious relationship among language, culture, and environment a relationship fundamental to sustaining both ecological balance and cultural continuity in the modern world.

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