

**Map 1:** Apmere Mparntwe 'Alice Springs'  
Places named (and pointed to) by a senior Arrernte man, Wenten Rubuntja.

## 2 THE CONCEPT OF PLACE AMONG THE ARRERENTE<sup>1</sup>

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Now as to the concept of space, it seems that this was preceded by the psychologically simpler concept of place. Place is first of all a (small) portion of the earth's surface identified by a name. (Einstein (1953:xiii) in Jammer (1954))

### 1 PLACE

It is necessary to preface the discussion of *place* in Mparntwe Arrernte with a justification as to why it falls within the domain of entities rather than the domain of space.<sup>2</sup> Einstein's quote echoes a popular view, within some semantic approaches, that fundamental to the domain of

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was written in the mid-1980s, based on a study of about 150 placenames, and discussions around them. At the time, I was still formally affiliated with the Yipirinya School. My deepest thanks go to the Mparntwe Arrernte members of the Yipirinya community with whom I worked closely in the 1980s. This paper was originally to appear as a chapter of a dissertation with quite a different organisation than the one I eventually produced (Wilkins 1989). Still, it had a relatively wide circulation. Many people gave comments on an earlier draft, and I apologise that I have failed to respond adequately to all the comments. For comments and discussion that they may not even remember giving, I am indebted to Avery Andrews, Edith Bavin, Alan Dench, Gavan Breen, Nick Evans, Cliff Goddard, John Henderson, Robert Hoogenraad, Harold Koch, Bill McGregor, David Nash, Jane Simpson and Anna Wierzbicka.

This paper had been relegated to a pile of papers I thought would never see the light of day because I had decided I would never do the necessary work of updating and correcting that was required. However, the editors asked to include it in this volume, even without the necessary updating. It is published here with minor modifications, updating of some references (in square brackets), the addition of a map, and a definition of **pmere** (which also appears in Wilkins 2000). While there are some details in the paper which, 15 years on, I do not totally subscribe to, I still stand behind all the major points.

Note that the spellings used are those of the mid-1980s. We have not updated the spellings of the Arrernte words to reflect the changes in Henderson and Dobson (1994), according to which **pmere** would appear as 'apmere', **pwerte** as 'apwerte', and **ntherrtye** as 'antherrtye'.

<sup>2</sup> This paper was originally written to be a chapter in a semantically organised language description of Mparntwe Arrernte. One major section was on language pertaining to entities in the world. Other sections included Space, Time, Causation, and so on. It was particularly relevant in the structure of the description that the discussion of 'place' (namely **pmere**) appeared in the 'entities' rather than the 'space' section.

space is the notion of *place*. The most radical position is that *place* is a universal semantic primitive through which location and other spatial relations are to be explicated (cf. Wierzbicka 1980). Such a claim would suggest that some form of lexical or morphological equivalent to English ‘place’ should exist in all languages and that this necessarily underlies the concepts of space and location. This position, however, runs into difficulties as we shall see.<sup>3</sup>

A fundamental error surrounding the concept of *place* within semantic theory had been the failure of semanticists to recognise that the English word ‘place’ has a meaning range which covers two distinct semantic notions. One notion is that of ‘*place as entity*’ and the other is that of ‘*place as one of the two arguments of a locational/spatial predication*’. *Places* in the second sense are generated into existence whenever such spatial predications (as represented by adpositions, spatial cases, or other morphological forms) apply. Such *places* are created out of any type of real-world entity and they exist as places as long as the predication holds true for them. *Places* in the first sense are a subtype of entity and exist, like other entities, regardless of such predications. An ‘arm’ is not a *place as entity* and, as a consequence, one cannot say: ‘\*Arms are places’. However, an ‘arm’ can be a *place as spatial relation*. For example, when a fly sits on someone’s arm, one can say (in English): ‘His arm is the place where the fly is’. ‘Towns’, on the other hand, are an example of *places as entity* and one is able to say ‘Towns are places’. Of course, *places as entities*, like other entities, may occur as *places as spatial relation*.

This conflation of senses is not by any means a universal. Many Australian languages, for instance, possess a lexical item which designates *place as entity* but not *place as spatial relation*. In these languages this second notion tends to be conveyed (or, more precisely, generated) by the use of spatial cases such as locative. This clearly brings the status of ‘place’ as primitive into question for these languages.

The failure to distinguish these two notions has given rise to some misleading semantic claims. Lyons (1977:693), for example, states outright that ‘places are not entities’. This is not

<sup>3</sup> Abbreviations used in this paper include:

A	subject of transitive verb	MpA	Mparntwe Arrernte
ABL	ablative	NomNEG	nominal negator
AFTER	‘after’-ative	NPP	non-past progressive
ALL	allative	PASS	‘do verb action while moving past’
Anm	Anmatyerre	PC	past completive
AS.WELL	as well	pl	plural
DAT	dative	POSS	possessive
dist	distal	REL	relative clause marker
DS	different subject	REVERS	‘do verb action back to/while going back’
ERG	ergative	S	subject of intransitive verb
GO&DO	‘go to a place and do verb action’	sg	singular
IMP	imperative	SS	same subject
INCH	inchoative	VbNEG	verbal negator
LOC	locative	1	first person
mid	mid-distant	3	third person

Morphemes are separated by hyphens: 1pl-POSS. Portmanteau morphemes are joined together: 1sgPOSS. Asterisk \* indicates an unacceptable form.

Words of Indigenous languages are in italics, with the exception of the emphasised **pmere**, the topic of the paper. Placenames in Indigenous languages are in italic bold.

true unless we restrict the use of ‘place’ to *place as spatial relation*. If we do this, his following statements are consistent with the position taken here.

As places are not entities, so entities are not places; but in so far as they occupy space, entities may serve to identify the spaces that they occupy ... What must be emphasised is that in all such instances we are relating to a place. But we refer to the place indirectly in terms of the entity that it contains; and this is tantamount to treating the entity as a property of place. (Lyons 1977:693)

This paper, then, deals primarily with *place as entity*. The discussion begins by looking at the semantic range, and applications, of the Mparntwe Arrernte lexical item that encompasses this particular notion of *place*, **pmere**. Following this is a closer examination of the Mparntwe Arrernte conception of geographical place and principles of placenaming. The discussion demonstrates how the particular conception of *place as entity* is reflected by the linguistic constructs and the lexical choices that are used to talk about and describe places and how, conversely, one needs to understand this largely culture-specific conception if one is to model how and why native speakers use the grammatical forms that they do when talking about *place*.

### 1.1 Pmere — camp, country, place

While the majority of Australian languages do not possess any lexical item whose central meaning corresponds to English ‘place’, they usually have a key lexeme, with very broad semantic application, that translates some senses of that word. **Pmere** is the corresponding Mparntwe Arrernte form and, as we shall see, its central reference to land and place, as related to other entities, makes it a very significant item of vocabulary. Its meaning range is typical for Australian languages and Mparntwe Arrernte speakers most often translate it as ‘camp’ or ‘country’ rather than ‘place’.<sup>4</sup> As such, **pmere** may designate a ‘camp’ in the sense of *an area containing several families and distinctive groups of people (single men, single women, visitors, and so on) all sharing some major resources but living in close proximity within a number of separately organised shelters* (example (1)). Alternatively **pmere** may refer to a camp in the sense of *a specific family or group dwelling place; more specifically the actual shelter shared by that group*. This latter case, often translated as ‘home’ or even ‘house’, may be viewed as the smaller ‘camp’ within a ‘camp’ (example (2)).

- (1) **Pmere** Stevens *mape-kenhe*, Macmillan *mape-kenhe*,  
 camp Stevens group-POSS Macmillan group-POSS  
*ante Rice mape-kenhe yanhe-le neme*,  
 and Rice group-POSS there(mid)-(LOC) be-NPP  
*ikngerre-thayete-le*.  
 east-side-LOC  
 ‘The Stevens’, Macmillan’s and Rice’s camp is there, on the east side (of town).’

<sup>4</sup> Dixon (1980:105) discusses in some detail the range of the Dyirbal noun *mija*, often glossed by bilingual informants as ‘camp’ or ‘hut’. Similarly, Myers’ (1976:158ff) discussion of Pintupi *ngurra* shows it to have a range comparable to **pmere**. Moreover, he proposes that the Pintupi view of reality is based mainly on three closely related concepts, one which is encoded by *ngurra*.

- (2) *Pmere tyenhe yanhe tne-me.*  
 shelter lsgPOSS there (mid) stand-NPP  
 ‘My house (shelter) is (stands) there.’

When used in the sense of ‘country’ or ‘land’ **pmere** refers to a large area perceived as having rough boundaries which may or may not be presently inhabited but for which Dreamtime stories are known and for which responsibility and care of the land rest with a certain person, family or group (example (3)). In this sense it has overlapping reference with *ahelhe* ‘land, ground, dirt’.

- (3) *Pmere nwerne-kenhe, Pmere Mparntwe,*  
 country lpl-POSS place Mparntwe  
*Undoolya-nge antekerre inte-me, Arlpere-kenhe*  
*Undoolya-ABL south lie-NPP Warlpiri-POSS*  
*pmere kenhe altule inte-me.*  
 country but west lie-NPP  
 ‘Our country, Mparntwe, is (lies) south of Undoolya, but Warlpiri country is (lies) west.’

Not surprisingly the three different applications of **pmere** discussed so far are each associated with a different one of the three existential–positional verbs [Wilkins 1989:5.1.3.1]. Shelters ‘stand’ (*tne-* (2)), camps ‘sit’ (*ne-* (1)) and country ‘lies’ (*inte-* (3)). Moreover, there is a hierarchy of possible inclusion of one referent of **pmere** within another which follows this same order (Figure 1).

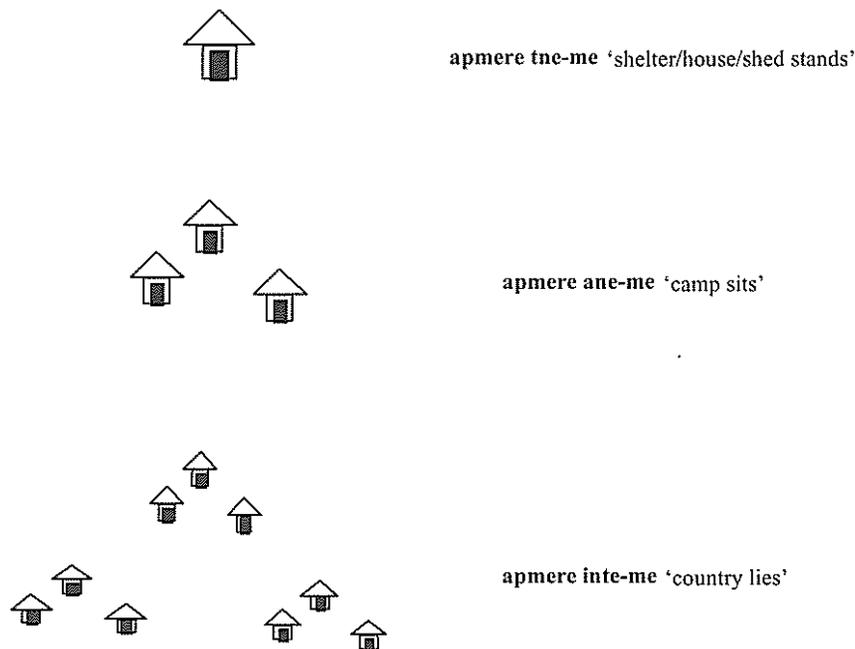


Figure 1: The inclusive nature of the referents of **pmere**

Thus far **pmere** has been described largely in terms of its association with people, and while this is perhaps its most common association, it is by no means part of the core meaning. An ants' nest may, for instance, be described as *yerre-kenhe pmere* — 'ant-POSS dwelling place', and the place within a spear thrower where a spear end is fixed and where the spear lies can be described as *irryarte-ke pmere* — 'spear-DAT place' — 'place for spear'. This latter phrase is a good example of when it is appropriate to translate **pmere** with 'place'. These and earlier examples, however, show that core to the sense of **pmere** is that it is *a place where, habitually, someone/something lives/exists, or could potentially live/exist*. So, unlike the general, abstracted sense 'place' can have in English, **pmere** is strongly identified as a place defined by its association with another entity or entities. Note further that, while various nominals may take the locative case, the location thereby designated is not necessarily called **pmere**. *Amwelte-le* 'arm LOC' — 'on the arm', for example, specifies a location which in English could be called a 'place' but, in Mparntwe Arrernte, could not be called a **pmere**. In short, an 'arm' is not *a place as entity* and is, therefore, not a **pmere**.

### 1.1.1 Pmere as generic/classifier

**Pmere** has been discussed in its role as a simple designator, but it can also function as a generic term, or classifier, for 'geographic place' — a function which is not shared by the corresponding word in many other Australian languages.<sup>5</sup> As such, it enters into a generic-specific construction [Wilkins 1989:3.4; Wilkins 2000] of which three subtypes may be identified. The distinction of subtypes is based on the nature of the *specific* element in the constructions.

Firstly, when using a *placename* it is common to precede it with the generic **pmere**. So, while one can say:

- (4) *Ayenge Sydney-werne lhe-ke.*  
 1sgS Sydney-ALL go-PC  
 'I went to Sydney.'

it is just as common to say:

- (5) *Ayenge Pmere Sydney-werne lhe-ke.*  
 'I went to Sydney.'

In the second subtype (examples (6) and (7)) the specific element which follows the generic **pmere** is the name of the *totem for a place*. In some cases a construction of this sort can provide the actual name of a place. In all cases it can be used as an alternate designation for a place. One must rely on context to specify which place, among a number of places of the same totem, is being referred to. Out of context it is assumed that the place designated is *the*, or one of *the*, major centre(s) for that totem.

<sup>5</sup> Yankunytjatjara (Goddard 1983), for instance, possesses a small range of generic/classifiers but *ngurra* 'camp, place' is not among them. By contrast, Yidiny (Dixon 1977) *bulumbu* appears to share this function with **pmere**.



- (12) \**Arrwe*      *pmere*      *pwerte-le*      *neme*.  
 rock.wallaby place hills-LOC live.NPP  
 ‘\*Rock wallabies live in the hills.’

But one could say:

- (13) *The*    *arrwe*      *tyerre-ke*    *pmere*    *pwerte-ke*.  
 1sgA rock.wallaby shoot-PC place hills-DAT  
 ‘I shot the wallaby in the hills.’

especially where the ‘hills’ referred to are known to the addressee. This is consistent with the meaning of **pmere** discussed previously, although the generic use has a slightly narrower (more ‘socio-centric’) sense.

## 1.2 Named places and placenames

### 1.2.1 Conceptions of geographic place and linguistic consequences

Many writers have noted, and elucidated, the special significance of the land and landscape for the Aboriginal Australians (Bell 1983, Berndt 1976, Elkin 1938, Spencer & Gillen 1927, Strehlow 1971). Strehlow (1970:135) comments that:

For the Aboriginal Central Australian the totemic landscape formed a firm basis for religion, for social order, and for established authority itself.

It is not strange, therefore, to find that the concept of geographic place is very different from the one held by Anglo-Western culture and that this has certain linguistic consequences. This has already been touched on, in part, in the discussion of **pmere** (1.1), but here the issue will be examined more closely in a discussion of named places — an important subclass of those places to which the term **pmere**, in both its designating and generic functions, is applicable.

Traditionally all named topographical places are important sites, or areas, which were created by the activities of totemic ancestors during the Dreamtime. They are the track, or imprints, which evidence the continuing reality of the Dreamtime. The subject matter of many Dreamtime stories is, therefore, an account of how individual sites came into being.

Rarely, if ever, in traditional stories or paintings is a place depicted on its own without depicting some connection with other places. There are at least four types of connection that can exist between places.

Firstly, places may be located along the same path of travel of one Dreamtime ancestor, or group of ancestors. Each place therefore represents different scenes from the complete story of that ancestor, and thereby shares the same totem. Dreaming tracks have been known to extend very long distances through the country of a number of different groups, and it is interesting to note that texts will employ special linguistic mechanisms to indicate the movement of an ancestor from the area of one group to that of another. Apart from a simple overt reference to the change, which is not always present, linguistic markers representative of the difference between the two groups may be used. Thus if a totem moves from Western Arrernte country, or Pitjantjatjara country, into Mparntwe Arrernte country, a song in the first dialect/language may be sung in the early part of the text and, when the change of area occurs, a song in the second dialect/language will be used. Similarly, reported conversation may first contain lexical items, or even full sentences, from the one group and later will use ones from

the second group. Most interestingly (from the point of view of what sort of morphemes can diffuse from one area to the next) it should be noted that in the narrative itself particles, and even suffixes, of roughly corresponding meaning in the two dialects or languages will be substituted for one another to signal the area change. In the following example from a Dog Dreaming text in which the ancestor moves from Mparntwe country into Anmatyerre (Ti Tree) country, the signal of the change is the switch from using the Mparntwe Arrernte allative form, *-werne*, to the Anmatyerre allative form, *-werle*.

- (14) *Re*     *lhe-me-le*,   *lhe-me-le*   *pmere*  
 3sgS    go-NPP-SS    go-NPP-SS    country  
*arrpenhe-werne*.   *Pmere-k-irre-me-le*     *re*  
 other-ALL(MpA)   Country-DAT-INCH-NPP-SS   3sg  
*inte-ke*.   *Ingweleme*   *kem-irre-me-le*  
 lie-PC    Morning    ‘get-up’-INCH-NPP-SS  
*aweth-anteye*   *lhe-ke*.   *Lhe-me*   *anteme*   *pmere*  
 again-AS.WELL   go-PC    Go-NPP   now    country  
*kngerre-werle*,   *pmere*   *kwatye-rl*  
 big-ALL (Anm)   country   water-REL  
*ne-me-rl-werle*.  
 be-NPP-REL-ALL (Anm.)  
 ‘He travelled and travelled to another place and when he got there he camped. When he got up in the morning he went off again. Now he’s going to an important place (in Anmatyerre country), to a place where there’s water (in Anmatyerre country).’

This demonstrates not only a link of place to place, but also a link of people to place, and of language to place.

Secondly, the same totemic association may be attributed to different places (for example, they may both be caterpillar sites, or honey-ant sites). This does not entail that the places be connected by a Dreamtime path. Where this association exists, the places are seen to have a similar nature and something that affects one place will then affect the others, as well as affecting the totem for the place and the people associated with the place and the totem. Thus, though removed in space, two places of the same totem may be treated as parts of the same whole and so become subject to the grammatical rules pertaining to parts and wholes [Wilkins 1989]. For instance, with respect to switch reference [Wilkins 1988, 1989], where one place is the subject of one clause and another place is the subject of a linked clause, *same subject* marking (*-mele*) may be used on the dependent clause to indicate the unified nature the two places are perceived to have via their shared totemic affiliation (see example (15a)). *Different subject* marking (*-rlenge*) could also be used with respect to the same two places, but in this case the construction would focus on the fact that they are different places which are physically distant from one another in geographic space (see example (15b)). Thus, one can emphasise either unity or separation, and this is consistent with the treatment of other separable parts of the same whole [see Wilkins 1988 for more examples].

- (15) a. *Pmere nhakwe kurn-irre-mele, pmere nhenhe kurn-irre-ke.*  
 site that(dist) bad-INCH-SS site this bad-INCH-PC  
 ‘When that place became defiled, this (related) place (also) became defiled.’  
 [Same-subject (SS) marking emphasises these are two places united by the same  
 totemic affiliation.]
- (15) b. *Pmere nhakwe kurn-irre-rlenge, pmere nhenhe kurn-irre-ke.*  
 site that(dist) bad-INCH-DS site this bad-INCH-PC  
 ‘When that place became defiled, this (other) place (also) became defiled.’  
 [Different-subject (DS) marking emphasises these two places are distinct and  
 distantly separated entities (and so backgrounds the fact that they share a totemic  
 affiliation).]

Note also that one place may have more than one totemic association since it may be the meeting point of two or more ancestors, or else it may be a place where the tracks of different totems cross over. Thus, a single named (socially important) place may manifest a network of relations (and totemic connectedness), and so, depending on speaker, or context, one relation rather than another may be given emphasis.

The third relation involves places being linked by virtue of the patrilineal pair association attributed to them. Strehlow (1970:110) stresses the importance of the *nyenhenge* section areas<sup>6</sup> (*nye* = ‘father’ *-nhenge* = kin DYADIC) as far as leadership and authority are concerned. Arrernte kinship divides the eight skin classes into four *nyenhenge*, or patrilineal pairs [cf. Wilkins 1989:1.2.4.1]: *Kngwarraye–Peltharre*; *Penangke–Pengarte*; *Perrwerle–Kemarre*, and (*A*)*ngale–Mpetyane*. Each named place is associated with one of these four pairs and because of this classification one can talk about places using the language of kinship. One can, for example, attribute a kin-relationship term to the association between two places depending on how the two *nyenhenge* pairs of those places are related to each other. Thus if two places have the same affiliation, they can be described as *kenhenge therre*<sup>7</sup> ‘two brothers together’, since two brothers, like the two places, have the same skin classification (see Green, et al., 1984, sect. 2, p.15). If one place is designated *Kngwarraye–Peltharre* and another place *Penangke–Pengarte*, then the two places can be referred to as *ipmenhe(nhe)nge therre*, ‘two mother’s mothers together’. In the kinship system *Peltharre* and *Pengarte* call each other *ipmenhe* ‘mother’s mother’. There is also evidence that people can refer to places by a kin term, the choice of the kin term being dependent on the person’s own individual skin classification and the *nyenhenge* classification of the place [for an elaboration of this point, see Wilkins 1993].

It would appear that the totemic association(s) of a place can be totally cross-cut by the *nyenhenge* association. This means that two places of the same totem need not be of the same *nyenhenge* section.

Finally, places can be associated by geographical proximity. They can, for example, be geographically contiguous areas or they may be places contained within a single totemic area. An area may contain several sites of different totemic affiliation but be considered the main domain of a single totemic ancestor. Usually such an area contains a site of major importance which is often the site where a totemic ancestor emerged from the land or went back into the land.

<sup>6</sup> Strehlow’s spelling *njinana*. The term literally means ‘father-together’.

<sup>7</sup> From *kake* ‘elder brother’ reduced to *ke-* and *-nhenge* ‘kin DYADIC’ followed by *therre* ‘two’.

It should be obvious from the preceding discussion that for Mparntwe Arrernte people a topographic place is not conceived as simply an isolatable point in space. Instead, a named place is a point within a network of relations and it is these relations that give it definition. These relations are not only, or even mainly, with other places, but also with people and things through kinship and totemic affiliation. The language reflects these associations at the levels of lexicon, grammar and discourse.

An Mparntwe Arrernte person's view of a place is necessarily subjective since s/he is related to it along parameters of varying intimacy. S/he may share the place's totemic affiliation — it may in fact be his/her conception site; or s/he may share its patrilineal pair association; or s/he may be related to people responsible for the land, and so on. All these relations will determine one's varying obligations to a place and constrain his or her behaviour towards that place, including how, or whether, s/he talks about a place. More specifically, this also determines the actual lexical choices and grammatical constructions the individual can use when talking about a place.

One further point which emphasises this conception of place, and the importance of the Dreamtime in such a conception, has to do with definitions given by Mparntwe Arrernte speakers for the phrase **pmere ulerenye**.<sup>8</sup> This phrase is usually glossed as 'a strange place', but in further elaborating its meaning one speaker said:

- (16) *Altyerr-iperre ne-tyekenhe, 'pmere ulerenye'.*  
 Dream-AFTER be-VbNEG *pmere ulerenye*

*Altyerre Urrperle-kwenye.*

Dream Aboriginal (black)-NomNEG

'**Pmere ulerenye**' is (a place that's) not from the Dreamtime. It's not an Aboriginal Dreaming.'

Another speaker explained **pmere ulerenye** by saying 'nobody knows the stories for that place'. Examples of places that were considered **pmere ulerenye** were places like Sydney and Melbourne. The phrase designates a place that lies outside the network of relations outlined above, a place to which an Mparntwe Arrernte person cannot calculate their relation, and so does not know how to behave with respect to it, because it is not part of the world that is organised by the Dreamtime.

## 2 PLACENAMING

F.J. Egli in his *Nomina geographica* (Leipzig, 1893, 2nd ed.) has demonstrated that geographical names, being an expression of the mental character of each people and each period, reflect their cultural life and the line of development belonging to each cultural area. To this statement should be added, that the form of each language limits the range of terms to be coined. (Franz Boas, 1934)

While it is probably a universal that all languages contain placenames, the way placenames are structured, and how placenames are treated grammatically, may differ from one language to another. For instance, some languages may draw names from a specific lexical class of proper names in which each name has no function apart from its naming function, while

<sup>8</sup> In this phrase **pmere** is in generic function and *ulerenye* is a 'type of place' nominal (2.1).

others construct names from the general stock of lexemes and grammatical structures of the language and tailor the name specifically to the place designated. English leans more towards the former type (cf. names like Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne) while Mparntwe Arrernte leans, as we shall see, towards the latter type.

An apparent consequence of this distinction is that while all proper names are singular definite referring expressions, and hence have a denotational function, names that arise in the second fashion may have, as in Mparntwe Arrernte, a strong connotational function. Another possible distinction between languages concerns whether placenames are formally distinguished from other noun phrases in the language or whether they are only distinguished on semantic grounds and otherwise ‘cannot be distinguished, in terms of their internal grammatical structure, from noun phrases constructed according to the productive grammatical rules of the language’ (Lyons 1977:640). Yankunytjatjara (Goddard 1983) is an instance of the former type; proper names have a special citational ending (*-nya*) and certain case endings, such as the locative, differ in form according to whether the noun phrase is a proper name or not. Mparntwe Arrernte is more of the latter type with the only formal distinguishing feature between placenames and other noun phrases being the ability for a placename to be preceded by the generic **pmere**.

Having encountered some of the salient features of the Mparntwe Arrernte conception of geographic place above, it should not be surprising to find that traditional placenames are not arbitrarily associated with the places they designate. While it may, at times, be difficult to analyse the meaning of a placename, older speakers state categorically that *all* placenames have a meaning and that this meaning relates to the account of the totemic ancestors that created the place and the actions they performed. In fact, a large number of placenames are analysable and there are a number of ways they can be seen to make reference to a place’s Dreamtime origin. The various structures and lexical items used in placenaming are discussed below.

## 2.1 Analysable placenames

*Headless relatives:* A name may make actual reference to the significant event that happened at the place as the following examples show.

- (17)    *Ntyarlke-rle*                      *Tyane-me*  
           *Ntyarlke*-caterpillar-REL    ‘to-cross-over’-NPP  
           ‘The place where the *Ntyarlke* (totem) crosses over.’

This is the name of a place in Alice Springs where the sacred *Ntyarlke* caterpillar crosses over the Todd River on its travels from the west.<sup>9</sup>

- (18)    *Aherlke-ke-rle*  
           ‘to-dawn’-PC-REL  
           ‘The place where the sun rose.’

*Aherlkekerle* is a site on the east side of Alice Springs where the *Ntyarlke* caterpillars, who were travelling in the middle of the night from the west, decided to rest until sunrise before doing anything else.

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<sup>9</sup> This is the place that Spencer and Gillen (1927:97, 98) spelt *Unjailga i-danuma*.

- (19) *Itn-ake-rre-rle* *Atnarnpe-ke*  
 3pls-(same-patrimoiety-dif.-generations)-pl-REL descend-PC  
 ‘The place where they (the group of fathers and sons) descended.’

This is the place where a group of men, all of the same patrimoiety (fathers and sons together), who were travelling along the MacDonnell Ranges, descended from the ranges and thereby created a gap that exists there.<sup>10</sup>

A significant feature of the three placenames above is the presence of the suffix *-rle*, the relative clause formative [cf. Wilkins 1989:8.1.1.18, 10.1.3], which commonly attaches to the first element of a relative clause. Furthermore, all three can be seen to be reduced clauses containing a verb and, where appropriate, the subject of the verb.<sup>11</sup> These placenames can thus be analysed as a sort of headless relative, where the head is presumably something like ‘the place where ...’ In a sense the head can be provided for such constructs since, as I mentioned earlier (see §1.1.1), all placenames may be preceded by the generic for places **pmere** — for example, *Pmere Ntyarkkerle-Tyaneme*.

*Naming by totem:* Previously (see §1.1.1) it was observed that generic-specific constructs with **pmere** and a totemic name may be used as the name of a place. Thus one of the names for Jessie Gap is *Pmere Kapelye*, where *kapelye* is the name for a kind of lizard which is but one of three totems for that place. In this particular case it is more common, but not totally necessary, to refer to the place by the full phrase including **pmere**. However, a site along the young boy Dreaming track, *Werre Therre* (boy two) — ‘the place of the two boys’, is more commonly referred to without being preceded by **pmere**. Whether **pmere** is, or is not, commonly used as part of the name appears to be dictated, at least in part, by presently unexplored principles of syllable count and euphony.

*Naming by particular totemic part:* Another way of naming a place is where a body part of a totemic Being is referred to and hence calls up the whole. Emily Gap, an extremely important site for the caterpillar totem, is named *Pmere Nthurrke*, where *nthurrke* designates ‘the black entrails of a caterpillar’. In many such cases the body part referred to is meant to conjure up, for those who know the story of the place, the particular Dreamtime event that occurred there. *Werlatye Therre* ‘Two Breasts’, for instance, is a significant women’s site along the *Women Dancing* Dreaming track and it was at this place that the women were attacked by young uninitiated men and had their breasts cut off.

*Part-whole constructions* may also form the name of a place. In such a case we have the totem name followed by the part name. This often occurs in cases where the part is so generally attributed to a range of different things that it would not uniquely call up the image of the totem on its own, unlike *nthurrke* and *werlatye* which are fairly restricted to certain entities (i.e. caterpillars and women respectively). As an example, Spencer and Gillen (1927) identified the place *Kngwelye Artepe*<sup>12</sup> (dog back) ‘Dog’s Back’, a ridge that is part of the dog

<sup>10</sup> Spencer and Gillen (1927:97) record this as *Innagurra-nambugga*.

<sup>11</sup> The verb *Aherlke-* in example (18) is a verb that takes no subject.

<sup>12</sup> Their spelling is *Gnoilya Teppa*.

Dreaming track. This last example is a case where there is a geographic surface instantiation of the totem and the placename clearly mirrors how the place looks.

*Naming by description:* The final type of placename that we will discuss involves a completely descriptive term which designates a prominent feature of the landscape that embodies the totem. For example, *Apere Therre* (red-gums two) refers to a site where two gums stand and into which some of the Dreamtime caterpillars of Alice Springs entered and then came out as butterflies. This appears to be the least common of naming practices although it should be mentioned that several placenames, which otherwise fall into the categories already discussed, do contain topographic terms like *atwatye* ‘gap’, *pwerte* ‘hill’, *ntherrtye* ‘range’, *inteye* ‘cave’, and so on (e.g. *Uyenpere Atwatye* ‘Spearbush Gap’).

A place is not restricted to having just one of these name types. There is evidence that a place can be referred to both by a prominent feature and by a name depicting an event. Moreover, as mentioned in §1.1.1 it seems that all places can be designated by their totem name. The question of whether all places do, or did, have more than one name, and therefore what significance might attach to each name type, remains to be investigated.

## 2.2 Placenames that are not immediately analysable

Having discussed names that can be analysed, we must now consider, briefly, placenames that do not appear to be analysable; in terms of Mparntwe Arrernte at any rate. Strehlow (1970:70ff) has shown how phonemic changes were intentionally employed ‘in ritual sphere in order to make even ordinary words less easily intelligible to those who had not yet been admitted to full knowledge’. He goes on to comment that if these conscious phonemic changes were taken into account then ‘many of the proper names of the supernatural personages and sacred sites found in the myths and traditions would become meaningful’. One example that he provides involves the name for Jay Creek — *Iwepetheke*.<sup>13</sup> This is traditionally explained as meaning ‘the web covered it’ and while *iwepe* means ‘web’, Strehlow claims that *(a)theke* is a deformation of the past tense of the verb ‘to cover’, which in Mparntwe Arrernte is *arte-ke* and in Western Arrernte is *ita-ke*.<sup>14</sup> Thus a lamino-dental stop has replaced an apical stop. So, phonemic confusion is likely to be one complicating factor in the analysis of placenames.

Another complicating factor appears to relate to the main origin of the totemic ancestor of a place. The larger Mparntwe area is caterpillar country and the places within that area which belong to one of the three caterpillar dreamings — *Ntyarlke*, *Yeperenye*, and *Utnerrengatye* — by and large have names that are analysable in terms of Mparntwe Arrernte. Other totemic Beings whose origin or main place is outside the Mparntwe area have places within that area attributed to them. The names of these places are often not rendered in Mparntwe Arrernte, but instead reflect the linguistic area of the totem’s main affiliation. Thus, a dog Dreaming site in the Alice Springs town region is called *Arengke-rlé*. *Arengke* is an Eastern Arrernte or Anmatyerre word meaning ‘dog’, not the Mparntwe Arrernte word (*kngwelye*); the track of the dog Dreaming enters the Mparntwe area from the north from out of the region in which *arengke* is used as the common term. Another place, this time of the Devil Dog totem, is

<sup>13</sup> Strehlow’s spelling is *Iwuptataka*.

<sup>14</sup> Strehlow’s *etaka*.

named *Yarrentye Arltere* (devil white), or ‘the White Devil’. *Arltere* is the Alyawarr word for ‘white’ and it is from this linguistic area that the Devil Dog entered into the region of Alice Springs.<sup>15</sup> These names are recognition of the fact that the totem of the named place has its main association with another area and, further, helps to keep track of the actual origin and direction of travel of the Dreaming line of that totem. One can but speculate as to the effect such conventions would have on the transmission of new vocabulary from one group to another.

One further feature of Mparntwe Arrernte placenaming which should be discussed is the use of the name designating a significant site for the larger area containing the site. This larger area may contain other less significant sites (and their corresponding placenames). So, as mentioned previously, *Mparntwe* specifically designates the most important site of the Yeperenye totem and this site is located within the township of Alice Springs. But, this name also designates the whole of the traditional area of the Mparntwe Arrernte speakers, which contains as one part of it the township of Alice Springs and hence the more specific site. Places within such large areas may themselves exhibit the same feature of narrow and wide reference on a smaller scale.

It is interesting to notice that the English names attributed to the town camps also reflect a similar feature of naming. Many camps get their English name from a prominent English-named place which they are close to. Thus the camp that is near an old-age home called ‘Old Timers’ is itself called ‘Old Timers’; the camp that is behind the drive-in is ‘Drive-in Camp’ (*Nthepe*); and the camp near the place where the railway trucking yards used to be is called ‘Trucking Yards Camp’ (*Nyewente*). Here an English name for a prominent place can be seen to designate a nearby Aboriginal place as well — naming by contiguity.

From the above discussion we can see that while the origin of individual places is detailed in Dreamtime stories, the names of places themselves can be seen as a sort of mnemonic by which stories can be remembered and kept straight. In short, placenames themselves keep track of totems and events. A placename in Mparntwe Arrernte, as elsewhere in Arrernte country, is more than a simple referring expression; it is a compressed image linked to and recalling a larger Dreamtime history. In other words, placenames call up semantic information that one does not have access to without access to the cultural norms. An understanding of this aspect of the Mparntwe Arrernte language and culture is essential for understanding the important role of placenames in song, incantations and texts, and appreciating the subtleties that lie therein.

## CONCLUSION

It has been demonstrated here that in Mparntwe Arrernte the conception of *place as entity* designated by the term **pmere** is a complex one. The evidence supports Goddard’s (1986:9) criticism of the use of ‘place’ as a universal semantic primitive in which he states that: ‘Despite its general appeal, there may be no general or ideal sense of “place” that can be translated simply into other languages.’ **Pmere** is invested with important cultural significance and is inextricably linked with other social entities such as people and totems. Such denotational and connotational complexity clearly precludes its use as a semantic primitive despite its being the closest lexical equivalent to English ‘place’. Moreover, while all **pmere** may be ‘places’, not all ‘places’ are **pmere** — *place as entity* should not be

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<sup>15</sup> The Mparntwe Arrernte word for ‘white’ is *mperlkere*.

confused with location as system. It may well be that the general applicability of the word 'place' in English to designate any location is the exception rather than the rule among the world's languages. This is of course an empirical question which bears investigation.

We may conclude by reiterating that the cultural perceptions of *place as entity* are clearly reflected in language, from the level of morphology to the level of discourse. The existence of a generic term for socially-significant geographic places; the ability for two places to be treated as parts of the same whole even when separated in space; the applicability of kin terminology to geographical places; the significance of placenames as compressed images and mnemonic devices; and the importance of place in story and song all give evidence of the Mparntwe Arrernte conception of place and of how and why people talk, or fail to talk, about places the way they do. Finally, it should be clear that an understanding of the Dreamtime, and the philosophy embodied in it, is a *sine qua non* for understanding the concept of **pmere** 'place, camp, country, home'.

## APPENDIX: DEFINING PMERE

This definition was published in Wilkins [2000], and represents an attempt to define the meaning of **pmere** in Natural Semantic Metalanguage. In the 1980s, when I wrote this paper, I was deeply involved in several discussions surrounding Anna Wierzbicka's work with and on semantic primitives (e.g. Wierzbicka 1980). Two of the main issues were: What are the correct semantic primitives? and How does one identify and describe cultural key words? More specifically, there was an issue as to whether her proposed primitive 'world' was actually suited to the semantic description of 'place' and 'time'. The semantic primitives research later became the Natural Semantic Metalanguage approach. I subscribe to some of the main tenets. Mainly, words in other languages can be rigorously defined using structured definitions formulated as a series of propositions using simple language. I see these definitions as rendering knowledge structures associated with the use and interpretation of a word in a given speech community. While most words give some insight into the socio-ideology of a group, cultural key terms like **pmere** provide especially rich insights into the cultural community.

### **pmere**

Places of different kinds which are

thought of as being important to people.

Thinking of such places,

people could say these things about them

these are places where someone [people or Ancestral Beings]

could live at for some time.

They can be of different sizes,

some being big enough for only one person or Ancestral Being

some being big enough for many people

or Ancestral Beings to live together

some being so big that they contain within them other places of this kind. Such places have proper names of their own (like people). Some places of this kind are classified as kin and are said to be related to other places, and to certain people, in the same way people are related to one another.

All such places came into being because of actions of Ancestral Beings during the Dreamtime. Smaller places of this kind are associated with one or a few individual Ancestral Beings, and through these individual ancestors are associated with other places and with certain people. Such places are of varying degree of importance and power. Some places are so important and powerful that only certain people can go to them, and if someone else goes to them, they may become sick and die. Some places can be visited by anyone at any time.

All places of this kind are meant to be associated with people who are responsible for looking after them, and who must do the things that keep the place and the Ancestral Beings that live there healthy. Every person is born with a close association to a few different places.

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