

# Splendor in the Grasslands: On *Plain* Place-Names and Patois

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Place-name generics referring to open grassy areas (*basin, meadow, prairie, flats, bottom, plain, glade, plateau, mesa, opening, savanna, clearing*) tell us much about regionalisms and historical fads, and surprisingly little about dialect boundaries. In this study I show how Spanish- and French-derived *savanna, prairie* and *plateau* diffused well beyond their original cultural regions, though *mesa* did not. Due to some complementary distribution I suggest a model of lexical competition.

Open grassy areas have been significant for Anglo-American naming in North America due to the search for good agricultural land. It has been crucial, for instance, to distinguish impoverished or toxic soils from nutrient-rich soils suitable for farming, hence the importance of naming barrens as contrasted with plains, savannas, and prairies. Here I tackle certain flora habitats that encompass similar topology. In particular, I want to focus on kinds of grasslands and other open spaces to explore the distribution of place-name generics in the contiguous United States.<sup>2</sup>

The grasslands constitute the largest biome in North America and offer the most open area (Cox 2005:51), and the Eastern deciduous forests have now been extensively cleared to create similar open areas. Four prominent terms for open grassy spaces are *basin, meadow, prairie* and *flats*, but these are not the only place-name generics available. Competing and overlapping with these are *bottom, plain, glade, and plateau*. Minor terms on the scene include *mesa, opening, savanna, and clearing*. Some of these are not intuitive as alternatives to *meadow* or *prairie*, but they may all indicate openness that is not too arid, too wet, nor too frigid for grasses.<sup>3</sup>

To keep this study easily replicable and verifiable, I relied exclusively on the GNIS site for my data, using the advanced search to return data in a comma-delimited format with decimal degrees. I then imported the data to Microsoft Access for further massaging of the data.<sup>4</sup> I restricted the data to certain feature classes as determined by GNIS: **area, basin, bench, cape, flat, isthmus, park, plain, reserve, and valley**.<sup>5</sup> I attempted to avoid

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<sup>2</sup> I omitted Alaska and Hawaii to avoid addressing a tundra biome or a tropical climate.

<sup>3</sup> Some of these I had not considered from the start, but were suggested by the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS) descriptions of feature class terms (<http://geonames.usgs.gov>); for instance, *flat* is used in lieu of *clearing, glade* or *playa*, and *plain* in place of *grassland, highland, kula, plateau, or upland*.

<sup>4</sup> In particular, I download a comma-delimited (.csv) file from GNIS in decimal format, then I import it to MS Access as a pipe-delimited file and set up a query using the following SQL syntax: `SELECT [longitude] & ", " & [latitude] & ", " AS [degrees] FROM Table WHERE (((Table.Class)="area" Or (Table.Class)="basin" Or (Table.Class)="bench" Or (Table.Class)="cape" Or (Table.Class)="flat" Or (Table.Class)="isthmus" Or (Table.Class)="park" Or (Table.Class)="plain" Or (Table.Class)="reserve" Or (Table.Class)="valley") AND ((Table.Latitude) Not Like "unknown"))`

<sup>5</sup> The numbers of entries in GNIS based on my criteria are as follows:

Basin = 2325	Bottom = 286	Mesa = 77
Meadow = 1981	Plain = 201	Opening = 66
Prairie = 1151	Glade = 159	Savanna = 38
Flats = 966	Plateau = 161	Clearing = 16

hydronyms and terms for woods, human artifices, hills/mountains, and the like. Finally, I used Martin Weinelt's Online Mapping tool (<http://www.aquarius.geomar.de>) to create the maps that appear in this paper.<sup>6</sup>

### PLACE-NAMES, SOURCE LANGUAGES AND DIALECTS

At the outset of this inquiry I assumed that there would be regional differences in the use of these generics and that some of the dialect differences could derive from the source language of the terms used. For instance, I would have thought that recent loan-words like *prairie* and *plateau* would be restricted to the former French-influenced areas of the United States (neighboring Canada and along the Mississippi), and *savanna* would be limited to the historically Spanish areas (Florida, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California), but in fact I usually did not find a close correlation between place-name distribution and language of origin.

The five main dialects of the continental United States are the Northern, North Midland, South Midland, Southern and Western dialects. Although these dialect groupings were based originally on lexical differences (Kurath and McDavid 1961), pronunciation differences reveal a similar landscape (Labov, Ash and Boberg 1997).



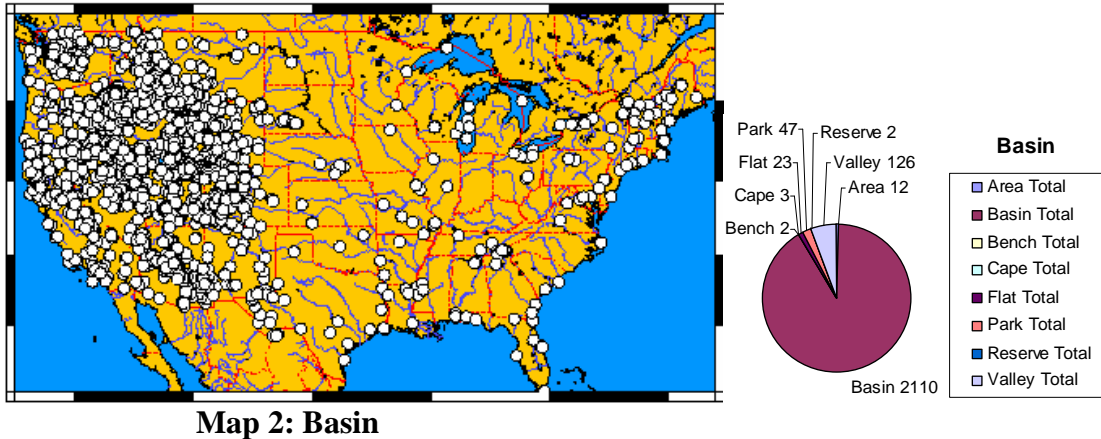
**Map 1: Continental U.S. Dialects (composite from Kurath and McDavid 1961 and Labov, Ash and Boberg 1997)**

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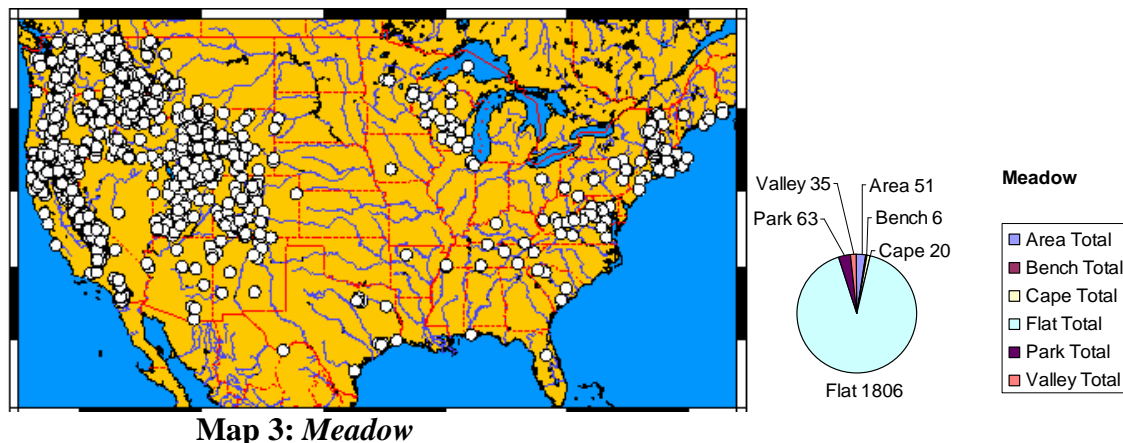
<sup>6</sup> On the Online Mapping site I created my maps with a northern boundary of 50 degrees, southern 25 degrees, western -125 degrees and eastern -66 degrees.

## BASIN, MEADOW, PRAIRIE, SAVANNA, AND FLATS

I anticipated that the use of place-name generics would conform to other lexical and linguistic patterns known for American dialects, and sometimes they do, but often they do not. Also, my intuition did not lead me to expect that *basin* would be so widely used as part of a place-name, but in fact it was the single most employed generic in my study: 2325 entries. Map 2 shows that *Basin* is widespread in the West and fairly common in the Northeast.



Nearly as numerous as *basin* terms are place-names with *meadow*. *Meadow* is found in the West (though not as broad in range as *basin*), the Eastern Seaboard, Appalachia, and Wisconsin<sup>7</sup>. *Basin* and *meadow* overlap significantly in their geography, but differ slightly in their meaning – *meadow* typically refers to a flat or a level area, whereas basin is a depression or low area.



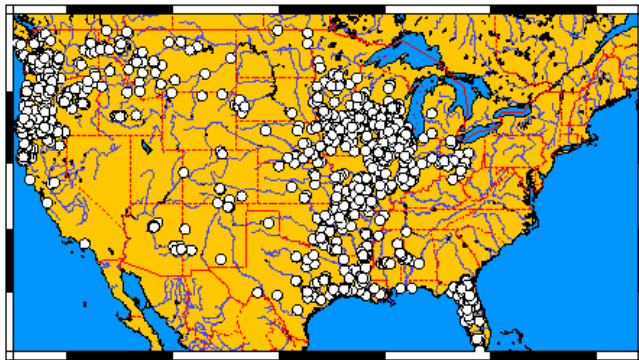
*Meadow* was previously analyzed as an old colonial term distributed along the Eastern seaboard (Zelinsky 1955:348), or at least north of Delaware,<sup>8</sup> but my work suggests its

<sup>7</sup> Wisconsin figures prominently and disjointly in several of the generics investigated here; this might be due to the extensive coverage of Wisconsin place-names in works such as Cassidy (1968).

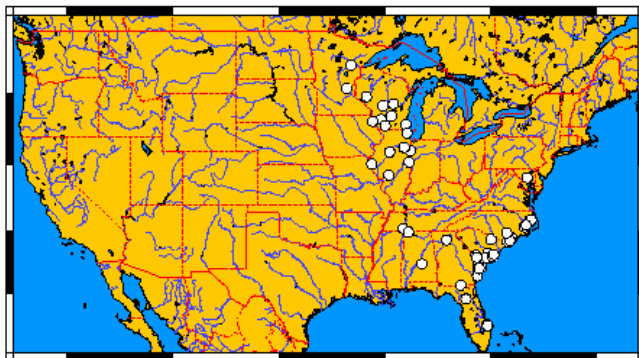
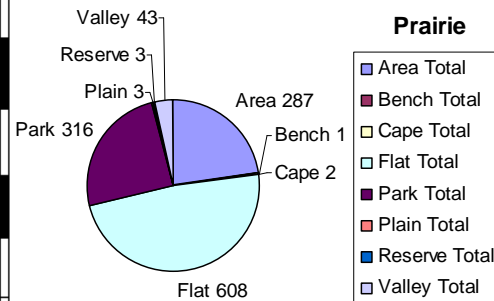
<sup>8</sup> *Meadow* “failed to penetrate far into the interior of the study area, and today it is found mostly along the Atlantic Seaboard northward of Cape May, New Jersey” (Zelinsky 1955:338).

range stretches down to Virginia — though not much farther — and it is far more prominent in the West than the East.

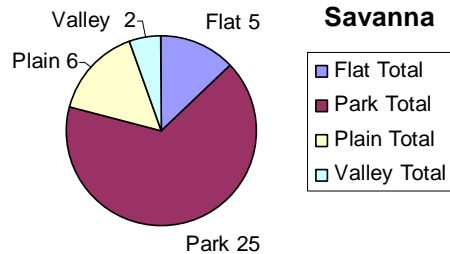
*Prairie* is found in the Midwest, Mississippi Valley, Florida, and Northwest; it is surprisingly absent from Michigan and largely from francophone Maine. And *Savanna* is restricted to a much smaller region in Georgia, the Carolinas, Virginia, and along the Mississippi. There is however significant overlap in the western Northwest. A glance at maps 3–5 suggests there is fairly good complementarity among *meadow*, *prairie* and *savanna* as place-names.



Map 4: *Prairie*



Map 5: *Savanna*

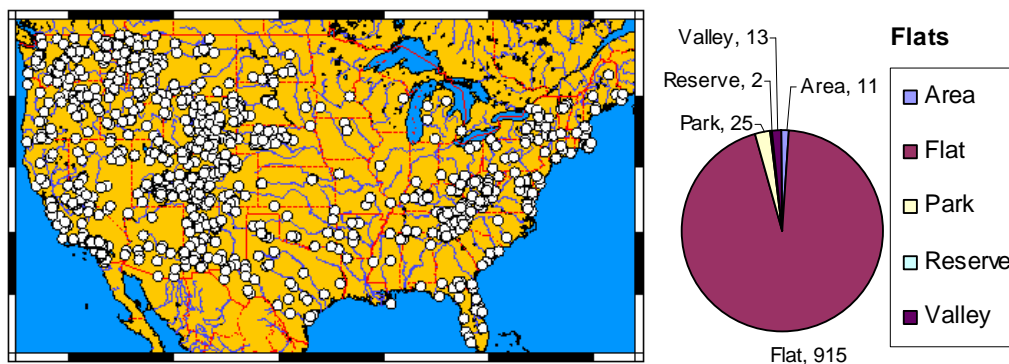


*Savanna* was borrowed from Spanish *zabana* in the mid 16<sup>th</sup> Century; *prairie* entered American English from francophone Canada in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century. *Meadow* dates back to at least Old English. As the oldest term, *meadow* might be expected as a widely used generic. It is only absent where its competitors *prairie* and *savanna* have taken hold. *Savanna* emerges in the coastal Southeast from Spanish but never really becomes popular outside that limited region except along the Mississippi. I suspect that the spread of *savanna* is probably **not** due to direct influence from Spanish as some of these areas saw little contact with that tongue (e.g. in Georgia and the Carolinas); instead, it diffused as a regional feature, most likely due to the city of Savannah, Georgia, and the Savannah River and their renown among English-speaking settlers. It is also possible that *savanna* was once in more common usage than today but got replaced by the later loanword *prairie*.

A fiercer lexical competitor to *meadow* than *savanna* was *prairie*. It entered relatively late in the history of the American dialects, but quickly spread throughout the Great Plains and westward. For reasons that I cannot easily account for, it became popular in Florida as well; I speculate that despite Florida having been a Spanish territory for hundreds of years, its subsequent takeover by the Anglo-Americans took place at a time when the term *prairie* had already supplanted *meadow* and *savanna*.

Here we have lexical competition of semantically similar terms, with the etymology contributing little beyond the date at which the word is introduced to the language. Knowing which areas have traditionally known French or Spanish influence is thus sometimes not key to understanding the lexical fads in naming places.

A *flat* is an area of level ground (though it may also refer to level land under shallow water, as with a shoal). The distribution of *flats* and *flatland* is nearly identical to *meadow* (compare Map 6 with Map 3). Both are common in the Appalachians, throughout New York and New England, around the Chesapeake, in Florida and the West — pretty much everywhere except the Great Plains. Thus *flats*, too, shows complementary distribution with *prairie* and *savanna*. This complementarity could be explained as lexical competition showing different victors in different regions.



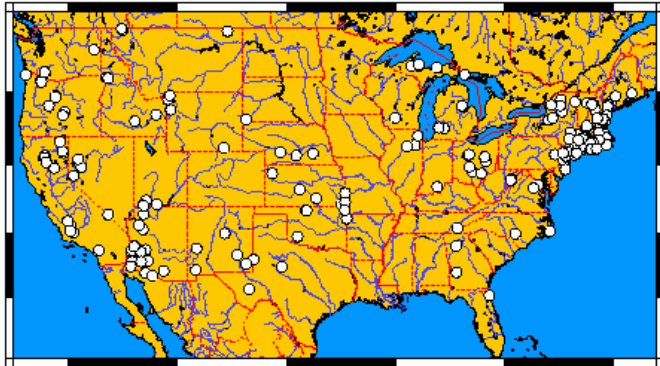
Map 6: *Flats* and *flatland*

Furthermore, Map 6 shows a demarcation of the Southern and South Midlands dialect boundary – one of the few instances in this study reinforcing sharp dialect boundaries.

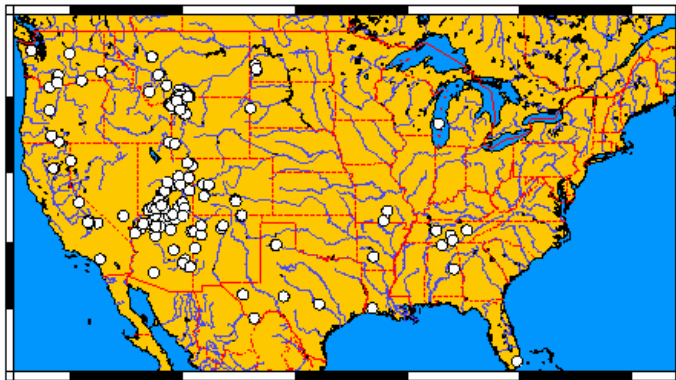
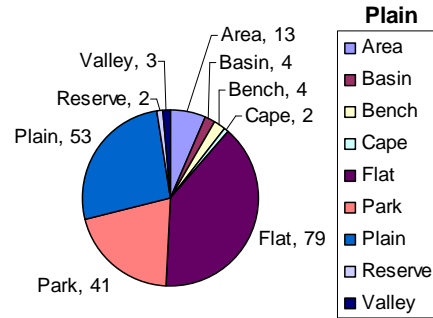
### BOTTOM, PLAIN, GLADE, AND PLATEAU

*Meadow*, *Prairie* and *Savanna* refer to grassy areas, at least, with some as large as a plain. *Plain* is a term of the Northeast and spread thinly throughout the West. *Plateau* is found in the far West and barely present east of the Mississippi. *Plain* is more often plural *plains*, and is spread generally across the continental United States, notably the Northeast and Southwest (Map 7), showing a slight disjunction for the regional distribution of *plains* (in the Northeast and West). Note that the folk use of these terms differs from the scientific usage: *Plains* is more often a flat than a plain, while *plateau* is most likely a plain, that is, a level area with a uniform slope.

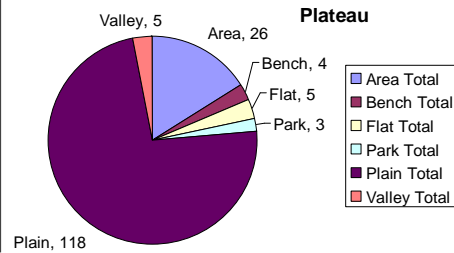
*Plateau* is also absent from the Northeast and is concentrated in the mountainous West and the Appalachians (Map 8); like *prairie*, it is a recent borrowing from French (late 18<sup>th</sup> Century) and is not actually found in the historically French-influenced parts of the United States. Rather, it is concentrated in mountainous areas where its usage is physiographically appropriate.



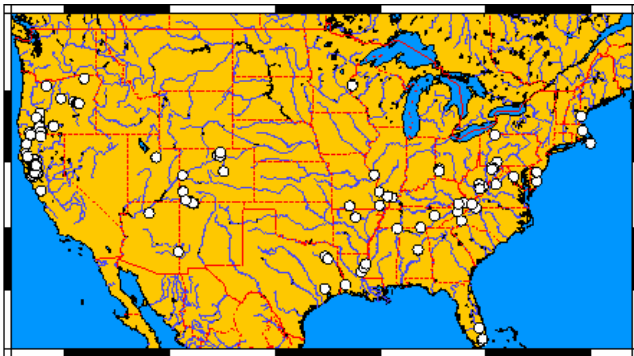
Map 7: *Plain*



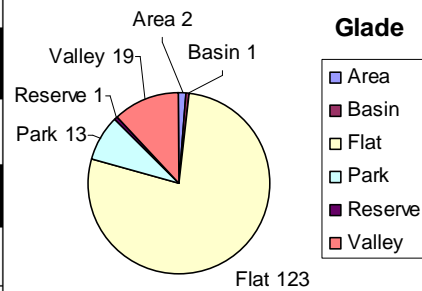
Map 8: *Plateau*

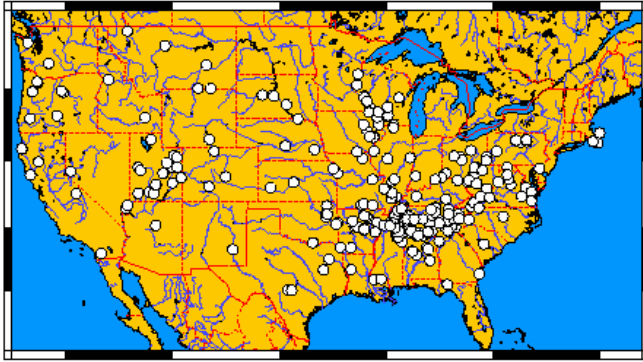


*Glade* is largely absent from the Northeast, rare in the Midwest and Great Plains, but more popular in Appalachia and especially in Oregon and northern California.

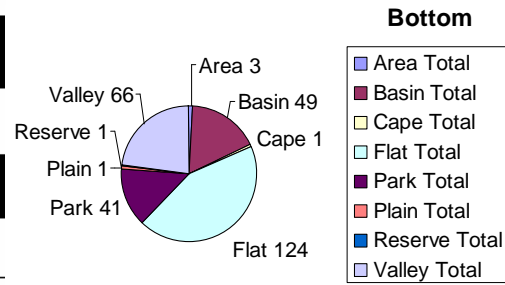


Map 9: *Glade*





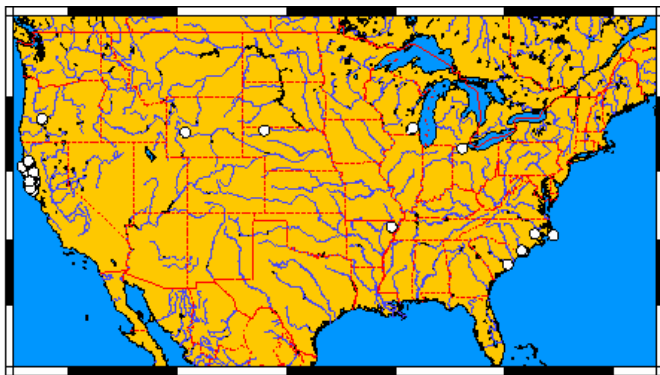
**Map 10: Bottom**



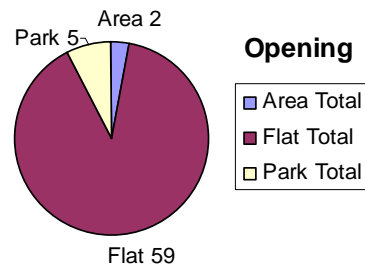
*Bottom* is concentrated in the Upper South and spread along the Mississippi Valley and in Utah. It shows how unclear the dialect boundaries appear in this work. *Bottom* is concentrated in contiguous areas of the upper South and lower South Midland dialects. Instead, it corresponds better to geographical features than to dialect boundaries insofar as it is found in the Piedmont and the adjacent Blue Ridge Mountains and absent from the Coastal Plain. That is, the boundary between South Midland and South is blurred in *bottom* and *glade*.

### MESA, OPENING AND CLEARING

A few other terms for open areas could be considered lexical rivals to the above considered generics as well:

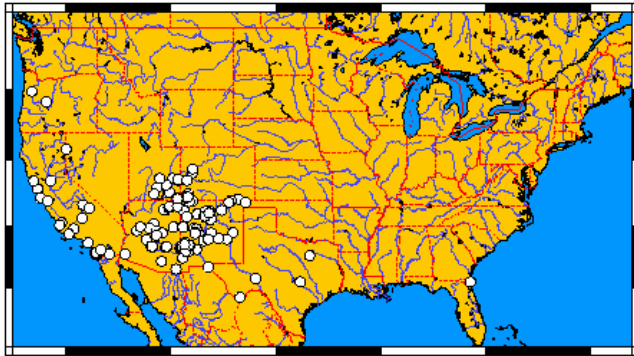


**Map 11: Opening**

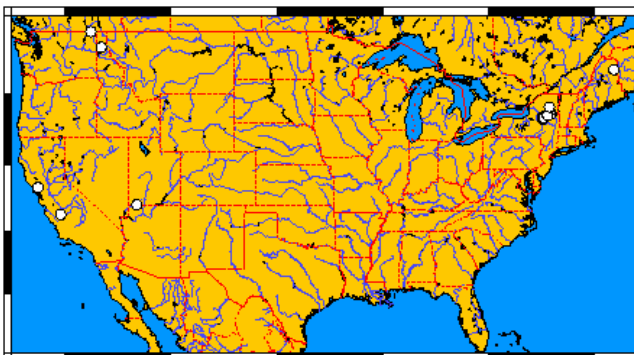
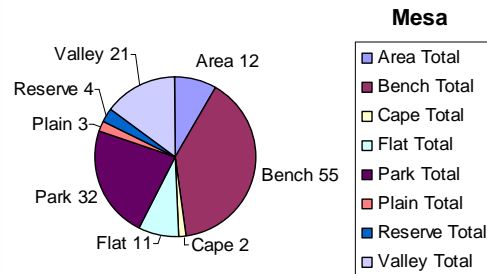


*Opening*, which is used to refer to a small open area in a forest or wood (as in Oak Opening or Pine Opening), is rare in place-names, except for northwestern coastal California, where it may count as a regionalism. Or *opening* simply may not be able to compete on the landscape with adjacent natural features (i.e. the surrounding woods). Perhaps openings do not stand out against the forest or just do not warrant names unless they are as large as meadows.

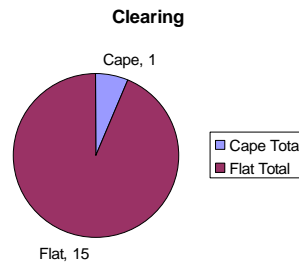
*Mesa* is a regionalism limited to the Southwest; it derives from Spanish for ‘table’. Map 12 shows instances where *mesa* is comparable to an open areas under discussion. It entered American English in the mid Eighteenth Century, but failed to diffuse from the Southwest. This is curious as *mesa* is a half century older than the more common *plateau* (Map 8).



Map 12: *Mesa*



Map 13: *Clearing*



*Clearing* is rare, and would not be handled here but for an interesting clump of eleven place-names in upstate New York.

## CONCLUSIONS

This investigation of various place-name generics referring to open grassy areas revealed a few surprising results. Spanish- and French-derived *savanna*, *prairie* and *plateau* diffused well beyond their original cultural regions (though *mesa* did not). Due to their complementarity, *savanna*, *prairie* and *meadow* appear to be competitors in the same semantic sphere, with *savanna* never really moving beyond a regionalism (or perhaps being replaced later by its competitors). But the complementarity is only partial as there is some overlap between *prairie* and *meadow* in the Northwest. A similar complementary distribution exists for *prairie*, *savanna* and *flat*, with the same overlap between *flat* and *prairie*.

There are a number of other players in the field, even if they are relatively rare or severely limited geographically. As outlined for *prairie*, fads can change quickly in naming practices, and minor players have room to move into the larger arena. Some, like *mesa* in

its grassland or flat meaning, remain restricted to a regionalism. Many of the place-name generics do not correlate well with American English dialects, but some do show isoglosses consistent with geographical dialect work: *Glade* and *flats*, for instance, display a southern boundary that runs along the Midland-Southern dialect border, which coincides with the distinction between the Appalachians on the one hand (South Midland dialect) and the Piedmont and coastal plain on the other (Southern dialect). Within the South, *glade* and *savanna* show a clear complementarity, with *savanna* on the Atlantic coast and *glade* elsewhere. And apart from northern Virginia and the Chesapeake area, *meadow* is largely absent from this dialect.

Some puzzles emerge as well. One is the fondness for *clearing* in upstate New York. A second is that Northern California and neighboring southwestern Oregon exhibit a strong regional naming pattern with *glade* and *opening* – do they hint at a sub-dialect of Northern Californian with adjacent southern Oregon (along with *prairie*, which is shared with the rest of the Northwest)?

On the whole I am not worried that these generics fail not conform to the major dialect boundaries insofar as individual isoglosses often do not; perhaps sub-dialect boundaries are the more appropriate comparison. Regardless, the grasslands terms explored here signal a strongly regional usage.

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<p>I welcome feedback on this paper: contact me at <a href="mailto:nevisj@earthlink.net">nevisj@earthlink.net</a> and visit my website <a href="http://www.geocities.com/joelnevis">http://www.geocities.com/joelnevis</a>.</p>
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