

COMMENTARY

Is it “the earth” or Earth?—A Response to Şengör’s Commentary

James R. Ebert, Dept. of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences,
State University of New York–Oneonta, Oneonta, New York
13820-4015, USA, james.ebert@oneonta.edu

Humpty Dumpty: “When I use a word, ... it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

—Lewis Carroll, 1872, *Through the Looking Glass*

In an interesting commentary, A.M. Celâl Şengör (*GSA Today*, v. 27, no. 3–4, p. 19) poses the question: Which is proper, “the earth” or “Earth”? Şengör argues that “the earth” is preferable because it distinguishes our planet from the others in the Solar System, which are named after Roman gods. The names of the other planets are capitalized because they are proper nouns, which Şengör argues is not the case with our home planet.

The English word “earth” is derived from the Middle English *erthe*, which comes from the Old English *eorthe*. In the kindred Scandinavian languages the word is *jord*, which is visually similar to the Old Norse *jörð*, which would be pronounced something like “yurth,” phonetically similar to the modern English earth.

The Old Norse *jörð* is relevant because in the Norse/Germanic pantheon, *Jörð* (capitalized) is a goddess who was the mother of Thor (Lindow, 2001). So, Earth, like the other planets in the Solar

System, does have a divinely inspired name, and so should be capitalized. Şengör’s concerns regarding when to capitalize Earth are easily solved. Earth (capitalized) should refer only to the planet as a whole. “The earth” should be reserved for regolith, soil, and sediment.

Earth is preferable to Şengör’s suggestion of the Greek *Gaia*, because *Gaia* is not in common usage, whereas Earth is.

Şengör states that “there is a much weightier reason that we should continue calling our planet ‘the earth’ and not ‘Earth’: it is our abode, not any old planet in the Solar System.” Earth is, indeed, a unique place and it is a specific place. As such it deserves the dignity accorded to proper nouns (capitalized) and not the more pedestrian status of common nouns. After all, when we refer to our own Mother, we capitalize the word to distinguish the specific from the more general, all mothers. Should we not do the same for Earth and by doing so acknowledge the origin of the word as well?

REFERENCES CITED

- Carroll, L., 1872, *Through the Looking Glass*: London, Macmillan and Co., 228 p.
Lindow, J., 2001, *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs*: New York, Oxford University Press, 365 p.

The Decade of North American Geology DNAG

This monumental project, describing and illustrating the geology and geophysics of North America, was created to help celebrate GSA's 100th anniversary. The collection of discipline- and region-specific books that once filled a floor-to-ceiling bookcase can now be read on your tablet or computer.

Volumes include:

- Centennial Field Guides
- Continent-Scale Map Series
- Continent-Ocean Transects
- Geology of North America Series

THE GEOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF AMERICA®

Start exploring at rock.geosociety.org/store/