

Report

A REPORT AND SUMMARY OF THE FOURTH UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON THE STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES, GENEVA 1982*

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Introduction

Within the context of topics being considered at this 22nd annual Names Institute, I believe it appropriate to draw your attention to the fact that governments on a world-wide basis have recognized the important function that geographic names play in a variety of official activities. In this brief talk, I will focus on the collective work of governments in programs to standardize geographic names through the auspices of the United Nations. But first, I will provide some background on the movement of the United States from an internal concern for geographic names to a nation playing a leading role on a global scale.

The Creation and Work of the US Board on Geographic Names

As the US expanded to the west during the 1800's, reports submitted by exploration and surveying parties to their sponsor agencies in Washington were often marred by confusing references to important features and localities. A report of party A in one year would give a name to a feature, but later, party B would give it another name. As Washington offices compared notes, they could not decide which name to accept. By the latter part of the 1800's, the confusion of such reporting – added to which was similar ambiguity concerning Post Office names that differed from names of communities they served – persuaded a group of map makers and geographers to call for a national names authority to settle names problems. The result was the establishment of the US Board on Geographic Names in 1890. Soon considerable success was realized in the elimination of a wide range of problems affecting names. The cases brought to the Board's attention originally were domestic, but soon it was seen that places outside the country also needed some treatment. Through regular meetings and the issuance of reports on names decision, the Board was able to provide all federal agencies with correct names.

In 1941, the task of the Board virtually exploded as the US found itself in a military conflict half a world away, and the only maps of many places in the "Orient" carried names in Chinese or Japanese writing. Consequently, the Board was charged with the responsibility for converting millions of names to roman-alphabet equivalents, and a large staff of linguists, geographers, and cartographers was assembled in a very short time to undertake the job. By war's end, the Board had processed million of names all over the earth – not just to prepare romanized names – but also to see to it that all names on maps and charts were standardized as to spellings.

After World War II, it was seen that requirements for standardized names remained a high priority. While the Board had carried out its work most creditably, it was decided that the continuing task required a different kind of organization, one that could work

with and reflect the interests of the various Washington agencies that were users or producers of names for cartographic and other purposes. Building on the traditions and work of the old Board, a new organization was created in 1947 under the aegis of a Public Law that provided built-in directions for its work.

Foreign Collaboration

For a period of years, the Board had already communicated with other similar organizations in the world, but the most significant relationship was developed with the British Permanent Committee on Geographical Names (PCGN). The extensive work carried out by the PCGN in names of many areas proved valuable to the Board as it inevitably expanded its experience in other parts of the world after the conclusion of World War II.

Part of this experience was also naturally directed toward the new United Nations. Beginning approximately 1959, representatives from the US, Britain, and other countries persuaded UN officials that along with other actions to foster international understanding and cooperation, a plan to promote the standardization of geographical names was also beneficial. After several years of working in various UN-sponsored elements, including a UN Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN), the persons in the forefront of international names work set up the First UN Conference on the standardization of Geographical Names in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1967. This conference was responsible for the promulgation of several resolutions that still today are responsible for useful programs.

United Nations Programs

With growing international support, UN programs have continued to be carried out. At one level, the UNGEGN, continuous work has been pursued in such fields as terminology, romanization, and international cooperation. At the highest level, the UN Conferences, the work of the UNGEGN is reviewed and given further direction, or as necessary, is disestablished. With the UNGEGN meeting every two years, there has been ample opportunity for impressive work to be carried out by representatives of many nations working voluntarily. UN Conferences are held every five years.

The last conference (the fourth) was again at Geneva. Attended by some 130 persons from 61 nations, the meeting was held in the old League of Nations building, now converted for UN use. During the meeting, which lasted nearly four weeks, delegates participated in twice-daily sessions, worked in some eight committees, received (and one hopes, read) about 120 papers, and, working together, added much valuable expertise to the many problems affecting names on a world-wide basis.

Romanization

Of the several questions facing the UN Conference in 1982, perhaps the one receiving the most attention was romanization. This refers to a UN program calling for all roman-alphabet (RA) countries to use a single romanization system for the spelling of names in each non-roman-alphabet (NRA) country. As it is now, France, Spain, Italy, the US, and other countries using roman alphabets have adopted separate romanization systems for names in Japan, the USSR, Burma, and other NRA countries. If all countries use one romanization system for all such nations, communications about places would be expedited. Thus, regardless of whether the language is French, Spanish, Italian, or English, all references to the capital of China would be Beijing, which is the spelling in the Pinyin romanization system developed by China and approved by the UN for international use.

The agreement to have single romanization systems is based on the fact that as a writing method, the roman alphabet is the most common. The use of a romanization system for a particular country, however, would not mean that that nation would change its native writing system; it would, however, use the romanization system for any documentation intended for external use, including tourism, and also internally for any purposes where tourism (street signs, airport and train terminals, and so on) is involved.

But the implementation of this program has encountered difficulties. On the one hand, there is the thought that each NRA country has the right to develop a system for international use. On the other hand, there is the idea that the RA nations should decide what system is best for them. Here the problem is that a system developed by a NRA country could employ letter combinations, along with diacritical markings, that RA countries could not pronounce. For example, according to one Russian romanization system that has been in some use, the name of Yalta would be *Âlta*. The Pinyin system of spelling names now used in China bring us Qingdao for the name formerly approved by BGN and PCGN, Ch'ing-tao; and Čelabinck is the spelling according to one romanization used by Russia for the BGN and PCGN Chelyabinsk.

Of course, the entire issue of pronunciation opens further questions. If the purpose of romanization is to develop a common scheme whereby individuals from any country can read a specified spelling and pronounce it with some hope of being understood by a local native, then from the beginning there will be frustration. In the first place, there is hardly any language group that does not have some range of pronunciation. So how could a "stranger" expect that his sound would be comprehended by a local inhabitant? How could the tonal and scale variations of some oriental languages be communicated into letters, even with diacritics? For this reason, some doubt should be cast on the rationale of developing romanization systems to accommodate pronunciation.

What about romanization systems produced by RA countries that antedate those developed by NRA countries? One argument for retaining these is that in some cases their use is so widespread that efforts to replace them with others will probably fail. To abandon customary systems would require the introduction of new names in literally millions of documents, while at the same time replacing adequate maps and reference works with new ones. In this context, the expense of standardization would be heavy and must be considered in any international standardization effort.

The United States, along with the United Kingdom, has applied specified romanization systems designed to fit the English language. At various international arenas, both countries have pointed out that the wide distribution of these systems – concomitant with the wide-spread use of English either as an official or unofficial tongue – makes their replacement highly questionable. At the same time, they have suggested that the near-universal acceptance of English for many international purposes makes a strong argument to adopt the systems as international standards.

National Standardization

Another important topic on the agenda of the Conference was the continuing effort to encourage nations, as appropriate, to create national names-standardization authorities. The impetus behind this movement is the undisputed understanding that nations can address a range of internal and international questions far better if they have a capability to standardize names internally and promulgate them to interested users. With standardized names, maps of all kinds produced by local agencies have greater reliability and value. This value has relevance to such topics as resource location and assessment

programs, transportation, energy exploitation, tourism, and education. It is generally a truism that nations with functioning names standardization programs also have a high level of mapping and charting activities. Since the advent of UN programs in names, a number of countries have instituted standardization programs with welcome results. In some cases, however, local linguistic patterns are making difficult the inauguration of such efforts. Through special programs, an example of which was a training course offered in Indonesia in June of 1982 and attended by people from nearby countries, the UN is continuing to promote standardization. At present, representatives from the US and the Federal Republic of Germany are writing a manual on the steps involved in the establishment of national names agencies.

Program Emphasis

While the field of toponymy offers many interesting and challenging opportunities for UN work, there is some danger that programs will become overly concerned with near-academic issues and will unduly drain the limited resources available to experts of various countries. Further, such emphasis can detract from more pressing problems of standardization. To hold UN programs to practical aspects of standardization, the US had led efforts to bring focus on work that will bring tangible benefits. As indicated above, romanization and national standardization are two areas that the US sees as practical. Further, the US has also noted that many nations needing assistance in names work cannot afford to attend the rather lengthy UN meetings. To help assure the attendance of representatives of these countries, the US introduced a proposal to reduce the time of such sessions. This suggestion was adopted recently by UN authorities with the result that the sessions of the Group of Experts will be limited to one week (formerly two weeks), and UN conferences will be limited to two weeks (formerly nearly four weeks).

Conclusion

The programs of the United Nations, of course, reflect the good will and hard work of participating members. A report in the *New York Times* several years ago noted that unlike other UN sessions observed, those concerning geographical names were characterized by a collegial and professional atmosphere where the goal of participants was to develop the most useful programs to the maximum benefit of all concerned. While various national points of view have to be maintained, and while progress in some areas has been slow, the overall results are encouraging. All involved in the field of geographical names – including linguists, geographers, cartographers, historians and others who work in official or academic capacities – can take pride in advances made and work accomplished.

* Extension of remarks given at 22nd Annual Names Institute, Fairleigh Dickinson University, Madison, New Jersey, May 7, 1983