Should All Unofficial Placenames Be Eliminated?

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Placenames can only really fulfill their roles when they unambiguously identify the location of the places they designate. The development of new information technology makes this objective almost essential. For this reason, the United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names have recommended a program to reduce exonyms. Is this to say that all traditional forms should be eliminated? The answer is both yes and no. If one refers to official documents, such as maps, transportation schedules, and road signs, then the reduction of exonyms must be considered a necessity. However, much of the geographic, historical and psychosocial materials favor the retention of large numbers of traditional names created for the places with which people are acquainted. The standardization of placenames must facilitate modern living; but in doing so it must not erase toponymic heritage.

Introduction

Each word in every existing language corresponds in theory to either a material reality (a thing) or an abstract reality (a concept). And yet, two phenomena tend to complicate this rather simple schema: polysemy, when one word is used to designate several different realities, and synonymy, when a single reality is expressed by two or more different words. This is also the case in the field of toponymy. The same geographic name may designate several different places (there are hundreds of *San Juan* in many different countries); but, one place can also have several names, either synchronically (*Sankt Peterburg* has parallel names in other languages, for example, *St. Petersburg* and *Saint-Pétersbourg*, as well as the affectionate Russian diminutive *Piter*); or diachronically—this particular city has borne successively the names *Sankt Peterburg, Petrograd, Leningrad*, and now again, *Sankt Peterburg*. To these names must be added other designations for a city that

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was once the *Capital of Russia*, a place that over time has seen no shortage of epithets (to name but a few: *Venice of the North,* the *City of Catherine* and, more recently, the *Russian Chicago*). At times, the situation is even more complex, since certain placenames have been *translated*, rather than *adapted*; consider, for instance, the name of the *Ivory Coast* which has almost as many different names as there are languages, some of which are difficult to decipher (e.g., *Elefántscontpart* in Hungarian, *Pobrežie Slonoviny* in Slovak).

Therefore, it follows that the millions of placenames that stud the planet constitute a veritable Tower of Babel where geographers, cartographers, and linguists have long wanted to bring some semblance of order. To promote this work, the United Nations, in 1967, held its first Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names (UNCSGN). Six more conferences have followed and the U.N. Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN), whose members provide technical support to the Conferences, has held 20 meetings, each convening from 50 to 75 specialists—ample proof of the importance accorded internationally to the standardization of geographic names.

If a single word could sum up the thousands of pages produced by so many sessions, that word would be *univocity*, a term which summarizes the largest and most important part of the collective effort. In fact, the theoretically ideal solution to problems intrinsic to global toponymy would assure that a single term—the same in every language—could designate each place on the planet. If it is true that today's universal access to the World Wide Web's global village argues for this principle, it is equally obvious that the possibility of achieving univocity represents a *utopian* objective, especially in view of the multiplicity of alphabets and phonological systems, which differentiate as many languages, coupled with the multilingual character of numerous regions. Moreover, so many other factors tend to complicate the matter by multiplying the number of alternate or parallel names.

The time has now come to face certain facts: even if the world's expert authorities on toponymy were to adopt officially a single term for the majority of placenames under their jurisdiction, as recommended by several of the UNCSGN resolutions, a vast number of places would still have several names; these, in turn, would remain in use despite ongoing efforts to reduce the number of *toponymic synonyms*. Such *synonyms,* which exist alongside the official toponyms, and may also be termed

parallel toponyms or *alternate placenames*, are of several types, and since each of these has its own origin and justification, each should be viewed as a separate entity in regard to standardization. We might now have a look at a few of these types of alternate names, leaving aside all references to toponymic transpositions from one alphabet to another, as these create a specific set of problems, thereby adding to the complexity of the question as a whole.

Exonyms

As defined by UNCSGN, an *exonym* is "a geographical feature situated outside the area where that language has official status, and differing in its form from the name used in the official language or languages of the area where the geographical feature is situated." (Kadmon 1998).

Since the early U.N. conferences, a progressive reduction in the number of exonyms has been advocated, with participating countries being asked to publish, periodically, restrictive lists of their exonyms. Although a certain number of lists has been produced, the hoped-for objective has yet to be achieved. In my opinion, it never will be. Why not? Simply because of the influence of centuries-old habits. It is also imperative to appreciate the disseminators of toponyms who are ever anxious to have their message understood; what is the percentage of English-speaking persons who know that *Krung Thep* is the actual name of Thailand's capital city or that *Köbenhavn* is the capital of Denmark? I once quizzed more than 200 French-speaking university students: only one knew the placename Köbenhavn and about half their number believed that Copenhagen was the Danish name.

This last is a perfect example of the resistance to using original names that has been fueled by the countries employing the major international tongues, English, of course, but also French and Spanish. Then, too, the new technologies, by aiming for linguistic simplicity and uniformity, contribute to reinforcing this resistance. The omission of diacritical marks in the texts and, more specifically, in the placenames to be found in a very large number of international compendiums, constitutes a specific problem, albeit irrelevant to English-speakers, whose language is free of diacritical marks.

In fact, reducing the number of exonyms, always a desirable objective, if only out of respect for original placenames, will have to be calibrated according to the several contexts. Exonyms should be

avoided, as a rule, in cartographic documents (especially aeronautical and marine charts), in international transportation schedules, and on road signs in border regions. In regard to this last item, it should be noted that Belgium is one country whose example is to be shunned, where placenames are posted systematically and exclusively in the language of the region where the notice is to be found, rather than in the original form—a kind of systematic domestic exonymy! However, it would be a mistake to try to perceive the use of exonyms abandoned in print or by the spoken media, especially for the names of countries, regions or major waterways for which exonyms are often the only recognizable placenames. Exonyms can also be used to advantage in pedagogical material, especially where local names are bracketed, to which a sizable number of atlases bears witness.

The finest contribution to solving the problems created by exonyms would be to produce, for each language, as complete a list of them as possible for which the standardized official form is given. Such instrument would help to disseminate the real names of all the places that are often known to users only by exonyms; by the same token, users would also be able to identify and refer to placenames in their original, often ignored, form.

Alternate Names

Even though the first U.N. Conference did accept the principle of univocity mentioned earlier, they also acknowledged that in bilingual regions it could be expedient for national toponymic authorities to officially recognize more than one form for a given place, while indicating which one has priority. In fact, many countries, including Belgium, Finland, Spain, Canada (particularly in Ontario) and several others have adopted officially a certain number of placenames in more than one language. It is equally true that the use of alternate placenames is always determined by many and varied sociolinguistic and geographic factors. In consequence, each case has its particularities and since, from one country to another, the situation as to the relative place and the recognized status of languages varies widely, there is no hard-and-fast blanket rule.

On the road signs in Belgium, there is a kind of "domestic exonymic policy." The city of Antwerp (as it is called in English) is listed as *Antwerpen* in the Flemish-speaking regions, and *Anvers* in the French-speaking areas. In Spain, the city formerly known as Vitoria is now

called either *Vitoria/Gasteiz* or *Gasteiz/Vitoria*, depending on whether the context is Spanish or Basque. On official Finnish maps, one may infer from the order of names of certain cities the respective importance of each of the two linguistic groups, Finnish and Swedish. In truth, there are as many situations as there are multilingual countries.

A difficult situation was created when the U.N. Conferences established that international standardization must respect the central government's standardization. This resulted in an international ignorance of the traditional names of linguistic minorities. In the former Soviet Union, for example, the Russified versions of names had been adopted for both domestic and international usage, resulting in the Russian *Kiev* rather than the Ukrainian *Kyyiv,* and the Russian *Charzhou* in place of the Turkmen *Chärjew.*

Today, the "national" forms must be used and disseminated, even if this means that users will have to make a number of adaptations that may prove costly. But does this compulsory updating imply that forms, which were adapted to national requirements that no longer exist, must also completely disappear? In any event, it will be wise to record all outdated—or soon to be outdated—forms, in order to preserve the full gamut of alternate names and the often lengthy succession of different names borne by the places these have designated.

Historic Placenames

Placenames are like kings. "The King is dead; long live the King!" For various social and, at times, political reasons, new toponyms replace others that have designated celebrated places, either over many years or but briefly. Does this signify that historic placenames are doomed to oblivion and that such toponymic destruction must be encouraged? For use in today's context, it is best to refer to the new name while indicating the former name, as is sometimes seen in atlases or on road signs. In any case, it is essential to remember that toponymy is also an historical witness that will always reflect a given era. Leningrad was no more the city of the czars than St. Petersburg was the Soviet headquarters; the place is the same, but not the era. The Battle of Stalingrad will ever remain the Battle of Stalingrad even though today the place is called Volgograd. Here again is clear proof of the need for catalogs that provide data or help reconstitute the succession of names borne by the places these have designated.

Geographic Nicknames

Geographic nicknames have not been widely studied as toponymic phenomena. Perhaps this is because they are not viewed as real toponyms but rather as a related vocabulary with characteristics that are different from those of actual geographical names by virtue of their origin, linguistic performance or unofficial status. And yet, geographic nicknames constitute a widely-used, quasi-toponymic vocabulary, especially in two fields: literature and publicity. In either case, nicknames offer additional, often subjective, information, which adds to that provided by official placenames (if these reflect reality, as their origin and their meaning are often hidden). In fact, geographical nicknames always have a clear meaning for they relay messages, mainly to publicize a particular characteristic, usually positive, but sometimes negative. Their interest is of a psychosocial nature, since the geographic nickname provides data about how a place or its desired image may be perceived.

One can appreciate learning that Moscow (Moskva) has received, among more than 20 nicknames, *Third Rome*, and Vilnius, *Jerusalem of the North*. It is also interesting to know that Venice (Venezia) has been referred to in the nicknames of more than 50 cities. Surprisingly enough, some administrators have adopted "official nicknames" for their city, usually for promotional purposes.

Functional Designations

In the language of the media or that of diplomacy, places are often designated by their political function. And so, in Canada we often say the *National Capital* rather than Ottawa, the actual placename. But be careful, there are many *capitals* which bear this title for other reasons, for instance the *World Pipe Capital* (Saint-Claude, France) or the *Chemical Capital of the World* (Wilmington, Delaware); in these instances, nicknames are seen in a marginal position with respect to the actual placename.

There exists another type of designation that refers to the function of a place, thanks to the use of a linguistic procedure called the *synecdoche;* the synecdoche is a figure of speech which, by means of a metonymical shift, allows for having the name of a part designate the whole (descending metonymy). Thus, *Paris* and *Washington* are often taken to mean France and the United States, or, more specifically, the French and American governments.

Conclusion

Reactions to the problem of the multiplicity of names for a given place vary considerably according to the context wherein the question of toponymic univocity is posed. This tenet very naturally emerged in the context of the globalization of data and communication systems to become over time the driving force behind the activities of all national and international organizations for standardization. Indeed, on many occasions, the United Nations Conferences have recommended reducing the number of exonyms. But, as was noted earlier, it has become clear that the widespread recourse to exonyms will continue in every linguistic context, world wide. Instead of refusing to face this inescapable reality, we must direct our efforts toward producing lists of correspondence between the exonyms of various languages and the official local forms; if we fail in this, over time, the exonymic forms of a few major languages will smother the original placenames.

There is nothing wrong with each language adapting, as it sees fit, a certain number of foreign placenames, since each toponymic form conveys a message, or in other words, specific data to help elucidate the linguistic processes that define the toponymic dynamic. The same logic applies to other types of alternate names as I have already observed. Moreover, it is essential that these be catalogued, recorded, examined and compared—efforts that will open a still underdeveloped, yet highly fertile field of research. A final remark: the standardization of geographic names is a necessity in today's world—it must promote, not extinguish, culture.

Reference

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