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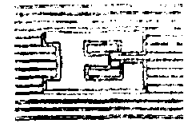
UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON
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WRITING SYSTEMS - TRANSLITERATION

Submitted by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO)

The ISO is an international organization whose object as laid down in its
Constitution is to promote the development of standards in the world with a view
to facilitating international exchange of goods and services and to developing
co-operation in the sphere of intellectual, scientific, technological and
economic activity.

The ISO members are the national organizations (one for each country) most
representative of standardization. They represent the respective national view
points in the course of drawing up of Recommendations for international standards.
At present 56 countries are full members of ISO. In addition, representatives
from a number of developing countries which do not yet have a regular standards
organizations of their own, are part of ISO as Correspondent Members.

The ISO has specialist consultative or advisory liaison status with the UN
family of organizations, including, ECOSOC, UNESCO, ILO, FAO, etc.

Responsive to the demands from many quarters, the ISO has been active for a
number of years in the field of deriving international systems for transliteration
of characters, or signs, of different alphabets into the Latin alphabet (also
termed Roman alphabet). After detailed study, which may involve years of research
or discussions and consultations, draft proposals are prepared under the ISO
system, by a specialist Technical Committee. After further discussions and
agreement within the Technical Committee, the proposals are submitted for large
scale consultation to all ISO Member Bodies as Draft Recommendations. Comments
and suggestions for improvement or amendment received at different stages are

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submitted to expert examination within the Technical Committee, until eventually the
Draft Recommendation is approved by ISO Member Bodies. It is then submitted for
acceptance to ISO Council.

The ISO system, therefore, provides not only for a detailed expert examination
by specialists, but also for a wide-spread international consultation in the member
countries.

The first work on transliteration completed by the ISO is the ISO Recommendation
R 9 - "International System for the Transliteration of Cyrillic Characters", first
edition of which was published in October 1955. This covers the transliteration into
Latin alphabet of Cyrillic scripts for the Slavonic languages, i.e. Russian, including
White Russian, Bulgarian, Ukrainian, and Serbian. A second edition of ISO Recommendation
R 9 is now in preparation.

In 1961 we published ISO Recommendation R 233 - "International System for the
Transliteration of Arabic Characters". This deals with transliteration into Latin
alphabet of characters used in languages based on the Arabic script, including, in
addition to Arabic itself, languages such as Persian, Urdu, etc.

ISO Recommendation R 259 - "Transliteration of Hebrew" was published in 1962 and
deals likewise with the Hebrew script.

Work is already well advanced for the publication of the ISO Recommendation on
"Transliteration of Greek into Latin Characters", and this Recommendation is expected
to be finalized for publication shortly.

The elaboration, or adoption of differing systems for transliteration into the
Latin alphabet would obviously create difficulties in international communication and
would confuse the situation. For the purpose of co-operation in international scientific
and cultural activities and for exchange of information and ideas, it is necessary that
one standard system be agreed upon for transliteration. This sytem should be one which
has been agreed upon through a process of international consultation and which is,
furthermore, valid in all fields of application.

The ISO transliteration systems are not totally new; on the other hand they
have been elaborated with due regard to older and well-established transliterations.
In preparing the ISO transliteration systems, international consultations and agreement
have been the guiding feature. Furthermore, the ISO transliterations are meant for
use in all fields, moreover, the transliteration systems established by ISO are designed
to be suitable both for the English speaking countries and for the other countries which

use the Latin alphabet, but which are not necessarily familiar with the English alphabetic traditions. It would seem very desirable, therefore, for any conference called to discuss transliteration for use in a particular field to take full account of the agreed transliteration systems already evolved internationally by ISO.

This does not rule out the possibility that a national transliteration or transcription system may be used in a country internally and may exist side by side with the international transliteration system. But, for international use and international communication, it is obviously necessary to prefer an international system.

The ISO would, however, welcome the opportunity for further improving the facilities for preparation of internationally acceptable transliteration systems. For instance, an expert or specialist institution in this field, not already collaborating with ISO, should be easily integrated in this work under mutually satisfactory arrangements. ISO already has in being the necessary apparatus for international effort in preparing transliteration systems and its services are at your disposal.