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THE TREATMENT OF TOPONYMS IN MANITOBA FROM  
LANGUAGES WITHOUT AN ALPHABET\*

Paper presented by Canada

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\* Paper prepared by Michael Munro, head of field research for the Toponymy Division, Surveys and Mapping Branch, Department of Energy, Mines and Resources, Ottawa.

THE TREATMENT OF TOPONYMS IN MANITOBA FROM  
LANGUAGES WITHOUT AN ALPHABET\*

(paper presented by Canada)

Canada has a multiplicity of Amerindian languages and dialects, none of which has a satisfactory standardized orthography. This presents a problem to the members of the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names, who, in pursuing a policy of assigning first consideration to names with established public use, must provide spellings in the roman alphabet for the geographical names used by the Amerindian peoples. The toponyms devised for these names must be transcribed into a form mutually acceptable to the Amerindian peoples, to map users unfamiliar with their languages, and to cartographers. This paper will examine some of the approaches to the problem used in Canada at the present time.

CURRENT PRACTICE IN CANADA

ONTARIO

In 1973, the Province of Ontario conducted a toponymy study at Moose Factory, on the west side of James Bay. A means of romanizing native names was developed based on recommendations of a qualified linguist, specifying vowels and consonants that should or should not be used when reproducing Cree names. The Ontario study established guidelines based on the creation of phonemes in order to reproduce as closely as possible the native names, and these guidelines have been very useful in the preparation of those in use for Manitoba.

At present, the Province consults linguists when any new Amerindian names are reported, and both a linguist and a native person occupy seats on the Ontario Geographic Names Board.

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*QUEBEC*

The Province of Québec is currently engaged in a field program on the east side of James Bay. In this study, the people being dealt with are Cree speakers, and the toponyms obtained are being spelled on the basis of phonetics.

An element of this field project which is much different from those in use in Manitoba and Ontario, is that the native toponyms being approved are in a form suitable for French-speaking persons. This results in word formations which utilize different letters or groups of letters than would be used in English to provide the same sound. For example, *ch* is used for the English sound *sh*; *qu* for the English *kw*; *ou* for *w*, *oo*, or *u*.

*The Department of Indian and Northern Affairs*

This arm of the federal government has jurisdiction in the Northwest Territories, in Yukon Territory, in national parks and on all Indian reserves. The Department is represented by a member on the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names who assumes responsibility for all geographical names occurring in these areas.

The policy adopted by the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs has two parts. For Inuit names, a standard orthography from which spellings can be provided for all new names has been in use since 1965, and is currently being revised. However, in the case of names of Amerindian origin for which there exists no written orthography, the Department accepts the spellings provided by the regional offices.

The Department translates into English or French approximately 30 - 35 % of the new submissions of Amerindian origin. This is done either because a name is unwieldy due to its length, or because it is much too difficult for map users to pronounce.

THE APPROACH IN MANITOBA*Toponymy Study 1975-1978*

A federal-provincial toponymy study (involving the Department of Energy, Mines and Resources, Canada, and the Department of Renewable Resources and Transportation Services, Manitoba), was initiated in the Province in 1975 and completion is expected in 1978. This study consists of interviewing local people, and conducting archival research at all populated places in the province, including the most remote. It is expected that by the end of the study the existing stock of approved toponyms will be doubled, from 7,500 names to approximately 15,000. Of these new names, it is expected that 50 % will be of Amerindian origin. A method had to be determined to devise phonemes in the roman alphabet suitable for word construction, while maintaining the integrity of the native names.

*Amerindian Names*

The importance of collecting, retaining, and applying native names should not be underestimated. Although constituting only 4 % of the province's population, the native people inhabit approximately two-thirds of the land area of Manitoba. With the new inroads resource companies are making into remote areas, and the associated large scale mapping programs being undertaken, the need to safeguard the toponyms of the indigenous people becomes more and more acute. These new mapping programs have necessitated great numbers of accompanying identifiers in the form of toponyms. In the past, it has been government practice to assign names honouring war casualties, bush pilots and pioneers, while private industry has provided names which are even more alien to the area.

Soon after the current study began, the large numbers of native names in the Sioux (Assiniboine), Cree, Chipewyan and Ojibway (Saulteaux) languages, made it apparent that a comprehensive and consistent approach toward the transcription of native names into forms recognizable in the roman alphabet was needed. Acceptable forms were determined by assessing the recommendations of the fieldmen, native interpreters and linguists, and by comparison with words in native languages dictionaries.

(a) Phonemes provided by fieldmen

The spellings provided by the fieldmen for the various toponyms of native origin are useful for reference, but much less reliable than those provided by the native interpreters. Judging from attempts made by fieldmen to reproduce in the roman alphabet the sounds of native toponyms, it has become evident that the use of local interpreters is necessary if the nuances and inflections of the various languages are to be accurately recorded.

(b) Phonemes provided by native interpreters

It is fortunate for the toponymy study that interpreters who have been schooled in English and are familiar with the roman alphabet and its phonetics, are now available. The performance of these people during interviews is impressive, they are painstaking and meticulous, sounding each name out slowly, then checking and rechecking the sounds, they record in the roman alphabet, by themselves and with the help of others.

The spellings provided by the native interpreters reflect the sounds in the names and respect the differences that characterize each individual dialect. This is an especially important consideration in areas where one language has been heavily affected by another, to the extent that actual words of one language have been incorporated in the other. An example of this is the language spoken at Island Lake, which "... is a mixture of Saulteaux and Cree; some words being Saulteaux others being Cree; compound words being in many cases hybrids of the

two".<sup>1</sup> Such areas as this, where the language is unique unto itself, places severe limitations on the usefulness of dictionaries and other sources, and increases the degree of reliance that must be placed on the phonetic spellings supplied by the local interpreters.

(c) Linguists

There are no linguists working directly on the accumulation of information in the fieldwork. However, linguists have pointed out problems that will be encountered with the various language groups and have recommended certain guidelines that should be followed for the Algonkian languages, Cree and Ojibway. A report on the Athapaskan language group including the Chipewyan language is in progress.

(d) Dictionaries of Indian languages

It has been found that the dictionaries available for the Indian languages in Manitoba are quite inadequate for the study's needs. A problem with them is that they generally only reflect one dialect of a language and are therefore not necessarily useful for all peoples speaking the same basic language. "Unlike some European languages which designate one dialect as the 'standard', or socially most acceptable, way of speaking Cree is equally 'proper' when spoken in each and all of its regional variations".<sup>2</sup> This statement while designating only one of the languages being dealt with is applicable to them all.

In addition, the dictionaries available for these languages are usually quite old and do not necessarily reflect the modern language, nor the changes that have taken place over the last one hundred years or more. Languages (like toponyms) are dynamic, and since these are not written languages with the type of uniformity that speakers of European languages expect, the changes are much more dramatic. Not only do the modern Indians not know the meaning of many older toponyms, but they may not be able to understand the language variations that occur from one band to another.

(e) Established names of Amerindian origin

Toponyms of Amerindian origin that have appeared in print for extended periods of time are left unaltered unless it is the wish of the local people to have them changed. While the spellings of these names

1. H. Christopher Wolfart: *Boundary Maintenance in Algonquian*, Amerindian Anthropologist, Vol. 75, No. 5, 1973.
2. H. Christoph Wolfart and Janet F. Carroll: *Meet Cree*, University of Alberta Press, 1973; page 5.

may not coincide with the guidelines used to establish accurate spellings, and the name may not be recognizable in the language of today, it is important to remember that with the dynamics of unwritten languages, changes occurring in the oral languages may render many old and traditional meanings obscure. Nonetheless, these names have persisted and are in local use even if the origin and meaning have been lost.

In addition, many established names may have originally been improperly recorded but because they have existed on maps and in documents for so long, the corruptions have become the accepted forms and have been adopted by the local people.

(f) Double naming

A problem was encountered in locales with substantial English and native populations, where each language group might use a different name for the same feature. An example is *Clearwater Lake* which is known by the local Indian as *Atikameg Lake* (meaning "white-fish"). An option open in cases like this is to use a double form such as *Clearwater (Atikameg) Lake*, but this method becomes unwieldy and impractical. As a result it has been decided that the least commonly used name be placed on record only, while the other be approved for mapping and documentary purposes.

(g) Verification of the proposed forms

The Ameridian names which are proposed for approval are recorded and submitted on maps to the native band councils for their comments before final approval is made. While the response that can be expected has not yet been determined, it is hoped that there will be a high degree of cooperation.

(h) Some guidelines for the transcription of Ameridian toponyms.

- (i) the letters "p" and "t" are to be used rather than "b" and "d"
- (ii) for Cree names the letter "k" is to be used rather than the letter "g", however this does not hold true for *Saulteaux* where "g" is used
- (iii) the letter "ch" should be used rather than the letter "j"
- (iv) the letter "s" should be used rather than the letter "z"
- (v) the letters "sh" should be used rather than the letters "zh"
- (vi) the letters "ay" should be used rather than the letter "ā" where it has a long sound as in the word *day*

- (vii) the letter "a" should be used for sounds as in the words *father* and *cat*
  - (viii) the letters "ee" should be used rather than the letter "ē" where it has a long sound as in the word *be*, except for the final letter in a name where it might be mistakenly assumed that emphasis be placed on the final syllable
  - (ix) the letter "o" should be used for sounds as in the words *rope* or *cook*
  - (x) the letter "e" should be used for sounds as in the word *pet*
  - (xi) the letter "i" should be used for sounds as in the word *mint* and as a word ending to represent the sound of a long "ē" as in the word *ski* - it should also be used to represent an "ē" when followed by a vowel as in the word *axiom*
  - (xii) the letters "kw" should be used rather than "qu"
  - (xiii) all marks ie. diacritics, accents, wedges, raised dots, hyphens, etc. should be avoided.
- (i) Some examples of geographical names recommended
- |                             |   |   |
|-----------------------------|---|---|
| Kokookuhoo Lake             | - | "Nightowl lake"   |
| Kasheesheepookak Lake       | - | "Lake where the duck was lost"  |
| Kakenosaykak Lake           | - | "Lake with many fish"   |
| Kasaseepakaneekeesink Creek | - | "Where the water sometimes flows over the muskeg before flowing under it" |
| Kitchi Lake                 | - | "Big lake"  |
| Wawakuskwayank Creek        | - | "Winding marsh creek"   |
| Gachekwaywaygegong Rapids   | - | "Where the rapids make a drumming sound"                                  |
| Atik Bay                    | - | "Caribou bay"   |
| Nasatagun Creek             | - | "Creek from the lake that is used for travelling back and forth"          |

#### CONCLUSION

The Manitoba Toponymy Study was started in order to gather in a system-



atic way the toponyms in use for the geographical features throughout the Province. As a result, an estimated 3,000 new names of Amerindian origin will be made available for topographical maps. Since no acceptable roman orthographies were available at the outset of the project, it was necessary to devise guidelines and standards for the creation of phonemes to be used in forming these names. The guidelines established permit map users familiar with the roman alphabet to pronounce the Amerindian names in a way that will make them recognizable to local native people.

It is expected that these guidelines will have practical application in other provinces and territories as toponymic studies are undertaken there.

