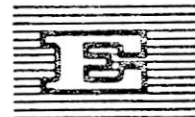


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THIRD UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON THE  
STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

Athens, 17 August-7 September 1977

Item 15 of the provisional agenda

Writing systems:

- (a) Conversion of names from one  
writing system into another:
  - (i) Romanization

ROMANIZATION

Paper presented by the United Kingdom

### Romanization

Too often in the discussion of international standardization of the spelling of geographical names there is found to be a tacit assumption that the roman (Latin) alphabet is a single writing system into which names from other alphabets or scripts can be readily converted and that the result will be a rendering of names satisfactory to all whose language makes use of the roman alphabet.

In fact the roman alphabet has been adopted as an alphabet for the writing of languages for which it was never intended and it is often, therefore, ill-suited to the phonetic character of the language. In spite of a common script the names of one language present written forms alien to another language, often evoking extreme difficulty in pronunciation, and on occasion the written forms of names may prove unpronounceable to non-native speakers. Fortunately the languages which present the greatest difficulty to most of the rest of roman-alphabet users are few in number. Nevertheless, the divergencies in the phonetic character of the letters of the roman alphabet as between English, Polish, French, Czech, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, German, Scandinavian, etc., are too great to be covered by an adaptation of the roman alphabet except with the addition of so great a number of accents, diacritical signs, modified letters and special characters as to defeat the object of general intelligibility originally intended. To attempt to promote standardization by such means would compound the confusion it was intended to alleviate.

Some concession is therefore necessary on the part of the roman-alphabet area as a whole if any form of standardization is to be achieved. Since the alphabet cannot be adapted to suit all languages it follows that some languages must be excluded in selecting the roman-alphabet form most suited to the purpose of standardization.

International standardization in the writing of geographical names, like all other forms of standardization, must consist of the twofold process of devising standards and then applying them. Unless recommendations on the standardization of geographical names are implemented, standardization cannot be said to have taken place and the efforts to promote a system are invalidated. Whether domestic or foreign, the degree of standardization of geographic names depends, not on whether experts have agreed standardization measures, but on whether the measures proposed have been found to be acceptable to the broad mass of users in the roman-alphabet countries in which standardized spellings are destined to replace those in current use.

In the light of these reflections there is really no practical alternative but to base standardization on the broad principle of the phonetic structure of one roman-alphabet language, adding suitable digraphs, diacritical marks or modified letters to make up deficiencies in the phonetic range. Should this prove infeasible, standardization may be achieved by limiting the language used for standardization purposes to the three languages - English, French and Spanish - which serve as the working languages of the United Nations Organization and also together comprise the overwhelming bulk of the world population using the roman alphabet. The benefit to the United Nations Organization and its affiliated agencies will be immediately apparent.

To limit the standardization of the spelling of geographical names to the three languages English, French and Spanish would not mean that discussion of the problem needs to be restricted to the native speakers of those languages. Indeed, the widest possible co-operation between experts from all linguistic areas who can contribute from their geographical or linguistic knowledge to standardization of the spelling of geographical names is not just desirable but absolutely essential, since the resultant spelling is intended for the whole roman-alphabet area and not just that part represented by those three languages.

As has already been stated, standardization cannot be said to have been achieved until the standardization proposed has been adopted and applied by a given country to the broad mass of geographical names at its disposal. Here the accuracy of the names and the positive identification of their location are vital factors. If the name is in doubt, if its location is uncertain, then the function of the name is greatly restricted. To urge its acceptance as a substitute for an existing name simply adds to the number of uncertainties and ambiguities.

Finally, the Conference is urged to keep in mind throughout its deliberations the danger of advocating measures which invalidate what is now in existence without providing a satisfactory alternative. In the absolute, the aim of standardization must be to remove or, should that not prove possible, to reduce the number of alternative ways of spelling geographical names. At the same time, care must be taken to ensure that a new era of confusion does not result from attempts at standardization. If the present large stock of names existing in English, French and Spanish were superseded by so-called standardized names, fewer in number, less precise in identity of location and less acceptable, or unacceptable, in spelling, then the interests of the whole world and the United Nations and its affiliated agencies will have been poorly served.

The Conference is therefore asked to devote its attention to consideration of the following:

1. For international standardization of the spelling of geographical names in non-roman alphabet areas the phonetic conventions of English, French or Spanish will be used as the basis for converting the names into roman-alphabet form;
2. In the event of a single system of romanization not proving acceptable for international use, separate systems based on two or all three of these languages will be devised.

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