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TERMINOLOGY IN THE STANDARDIZATION
OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

Linguistic Terminology in Toponymy

Submitted by United States of America**/

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SUMMARY

This paper outlines the special problems associated with linguistic terminology in general, including that employed in the field of toponymy. The problematic situation arises for the linguist because language is both the end and means of his inquiry.

It is suggested that linguistic terms be explicit, objective and parsimonious. Furthermore, attention is drawn to the fact that individual terms may be interrelated and that, therefore, any alterations, additions or deletions in a glossary need to be made cautiously. Finally, a few recommendations are submitted regarding deletions from and/or additions to the revised United Nations Glossary No. 330.

<u>Linguistic Terminology in Toponymy</u>

The field of linguistics is based on scientific procedures and
thus the establishment of a body of terms describing concepts and
language phenomena, the subject of the profession, was necessitated.
This professional terminology allows specialists in the field to
communicate accurately and efficiently among themselves. Linguistic
terminology - also referred to as "metalanguage" - is at times variant
because the linguists who have defined terms have had different training
backgrounds or different research objectives. However, linguists on the
whole use an agreed-upon terminology despite the occasional incidence of
idiosyncratic usage. Since linguistic studies employ the scientific
method, the problem of terminology and the necessity for a set of
criteria are more acute in linguistics than in other fields since the
linguist in studying language is using language uniquely as an
analytical tool.

The Group of Experts on Geographical Names has always been careful
in the use of linguistic terminology and continues to be careful. In
keeping with this commitment, it is appropriate to again examine this
pertinent area.

Against this background, it is important to continue to bear in
mind specific criteria required for defining linguistic terms used in
toponymy. The characteristics that need to be considered in terminology
are:

> explicitness
> objectivity
> parsimony

Explicitness is to be understood as the need to define terms clearly and
to apply them consistently. (It is the very nature of the linguist's
work to draw comparisons between language samples, mostly gathered in a
corpus, and relate them to one another. Therefore, consistency is of
utmost importance.) Objectivity mandates that terms are derived from
direct observations of language phenomena (empirical evidence). The
third criterion, parsimony, refers to that aspect of a definition where
all the salient properties that make up a linguistic term are expressed
in the most economical, simple way. A situation can also occur when a
number of alternative definitions is available and a determination has
to be made concerning which one is the most appropriate. This third
requirement cannot always be met because of other considerations
overriding it (cf. explicitness, objectivity).

The comments above are made because more than one third of the terms contained in UN Glossary No. 330, "Technical Terminology Employed in the Standardization of Geographical Names" (Rev. 2, 24 July 1987) are from the field of linguistics. The same can be said of the new "Glossary of Toponymic Terminology" proposed by the UNGEGN Working Group on Terminology (cf. UNGEGN Fifteenth Session, Working Paper No. 2, 1991). In this context it is necessary to stress that at issue is not only the question of assigning consistent meanings (senses) to individual terms but also of maintaining the interrelationships that may exist between entire sets of terms (for example, the terms *writing system*, *script*, and *orthography*). When a new term or definition is introduced, or when an existing one is modified, it can have repercussions on the definitions of other terms that have been in usage.

A few recommendations may be in order regarding some entries in the draft Glossary.

First, the term *dialect* should, in my view, be deleted, especially since the previous entry *language* has been removed from the revised Glossary. Furthermore, there is no really satisfactory definition that will distinguish dialect from language. It appears probable that no determination will ever be arrived at as to what amount of deviation from the standard of a language is compatible with dialectal variation, and at what point the demarcation line is passed and another language is constituted.

Second, the term *exonymization* is too long and awkward and seems not really to be necessary since there is already an entry for exonym; this additional noun expressing the process of rendering toponyms would appear to be redundant.

Third, the term *names transformation* ought to be avoided since it could be confusing due to one modern approach to the study of language, namely transformational linguistics. (In transformational linguistics a set of syntactic rules is referred to as transformations.)

On the other hand, the existence of bilingualism, both official and unofficial, in various countries would suggest that this term be added, particularly since the terms *pidgin* and *creole* are already included in the Glossary.

Another addition worth considering is the term *underdifferentiation* as it applies to transliteration systems and phonemic analysis in general.

Furthermore, the term *false generic* (e.g., Rio de Janeiro), although not being linguistic in nature, may merit incorporation since instances of false generics occur quite frequently in toponymic work.

In conclusion, in order to insure efficient and uniform communication among users and to avoid potential misunderstanding, linguistic terminology used in toponymy should be based on required criteria such as those mentioned above. The other issue set forth addresses changes made to the Glossary. These corrections, additions, and deletions must be approached with caution inasmuch as the terms used to describe language, including its written manifestations, are frequently interdependent. When the meaning of one term is modified, the meaning of some other term(s) in the listing may likewise be altered by implication.