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ON THE STANDARDIZATION OF  
GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES  
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Item 12 (a) of the provisional agenda\*

WRITING SYSTEMS AND GUIDES TO PRONUNCIATION:  
ROMANIZATION

A Phonetic Sample Survey Towards Improvement of  
a Romanization System

Paper submitted by Israel\*\*

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## A-Phonetic Sample Survey Towards Improvement of a Romanization System

As reported to the present Conference in a previous paper<sup>1</sup>, the present romanization system for Hebrew was devised in 1956 and published in the Government Gazette of January 1957. For the past 40 years this system has been used in all official maps and road signs in Israel; however, the Public Works Department omits underscores as diacritical marks on road signs. Non-governmental agencies hardly use it.

As a result of many complaints having been received throughout these years concerning several elements of this system, a *Commission on Geographical Names Orthography* was set up in order to review the situation, and the pros and cons for possible amendments debated. A number of potential improvements in the system were suggested.

In order to produce a logical foundation for eventual changes, if changes are indeed introduced, it was decided to conduct a user survey among the relevant group of users of romanized maps and road signs in Israel, namely foreign tourists, who constitute by far the largest group of "users" of romanized names. This was to establish if and how users of different languages are enabled to pronounce Hebrew place names in romanized script. It was argued that reversibility was probably of secondary importance, as even the (as yet) existing system does not permit complete reversibility'.

The main principles of this survey are the following:

- (a) The survey to be conducted among a sample of 200 tourists entering Israel.
- (b) The sample to be divided into six language groups, proportional to the number of tourists visiting Israel belonging to the respective language group, as follows:

|                        |       |
|------------------------|-------|
| English                | 45 %  |
| German                 | 22.5% |
| French                 | 13 %  |
| Spanish/Italian        | 7.5%  |
| Scandinavian languages | 6.5%  |
| Slavic languages       | 5.5%  |
| Total                  | 100 % |
- (c) Only tourists to be interviewed for whom one of the languages in the above groups is indeed his/her native language.

Each of the 200 tourists was handed a form with 25 suitably selected place names in either of two romanizations and asked to pronounce them. The readings were recorded on tape, the 5000 resulting name pronunciations to be processed at a language laboratory and later evaluated statistically. At the time of writing, the survey is at the stage of processing the tape-recorded results. Any conclusions will be presented to the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names at the appropriate time.

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<sup>1</sup> "Considerations for and against the revision of a romanization system -- the case of Hebrew", Paper submitted by Israel.

<sup>2</sup> The relevance of reversibility applies only to foreign persons conversant with the original Hebrew script, and therefore reversibility concerns only a minority of people.