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National standardization: toponymic guidelines for map editors and other editors

Grammar of toponymy

Submitted by France**

Summary***

The National Commission on Toponymy of France (CNT) has continued to adopt, expand and update lists of place names and to put them online (www.toponymie.gouv.fr). Some of these lists have served as references for standards.

On the basis of this experience, CNT has sought to express the consistent patterns in these lists in the form of grammatical recommendations. This work has culminated in a project on the “grammar of toponymy”, which is intended for inclusion in the introduction to a dictionary that combines these lists and supplements them with etymological information. The dictionary is due to be published in 2007, partly in print and partly on CD-ROM.

All grammars aim to derive consistent patterns from usage. Usage is therefore the source of grammar, in that the purpose of any grammatical rule is simply to formalize the most widespread usage or, in the event of divergences, the “correct usage”. Usage also takes precedence over grammar, in that no grammatical rule attempts to modify established correct usage, which merely constitutes an exception if it is contrary to a rule derived from the most common usage. Lastly, usage is the yardstick by which grammar is judged, in that the validity of a grammatical rule is measured not only by its degree of logic and simplicity, but also and especially by the scarcity and age of the exceptions to it in correct usage.

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*** The full text of the paper is being issued in French only as document E/CONF.98/78/Add.1.



However, the fact that grammar is subordinate to usage does not make it redundant. First of all, grammar allows logic to supplement the memory of the user, who will find it easier to apply a set of logical rules than to learn lists of names. Such lists nonetheless remain necessary, particularly for reference purposes or to check how the rules apply in cases of uncertainty, and grammar must therefore serve as a reference for the authors of such lists. Lastly, our grammar is intended to be taken as a guide to correct usage for the creators of place names.

The recommendations already drawn up by CNT for France are set out below. They are still to be discussed with other French-speaking geographical names authorities with a view to reaching a consensus.
