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Terminology in the standardization of geographical names

Report of the Working Group on Toponymic Terminology

Submitted by the Working Group on Toponymic Terminology**

Summary

The report presents the work done by the Working Group on Toponymic Terminology during the period 2007–2012 starting with a short background. The Working Group was set up in 1989 and was able to launch a first, printed version of its *Glossary of Terms* in 2002, followed by an Addendum in 2007. The Working Group has met four times during the period: in Vienna (2008), Toronto (2008), Uppsala (2010), and Vienna again (2011). A fruitful cooperation with the terminological group of ICOS (the International Council of Onomastic Sciences) has begun, starting with a joint meeting with the two terminology groups in 2008. New or amended toponymic terms and/or definitions have been discussed throughout the period but no decisions of any kind have been made. Instead the working group encourages the development of a database on toponymic terminology which is under way, based on the UNGEGN Glossary.

Background

The Working Group on Toponymic Terminology was set up by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names at its 14th Session in Geneva in May 1989. The main tasks of the group were to produce a new glossary of toponymic terminology, and to periodically review and update the glossary. The first glossary had been completed in 1984, with revisions in 1986 and 1987. The first task was achieved in 2002 when the *Glossary of Terms for the Standardization of Geographical Names* (edited by Naftali Kadmon, Israel), including 375 terms and their definitions in the six official UN languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish), was published in one combined volume with appropriate cross-referencing.

In resolution VIII/3 (2002) the Eighth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names (UNCSGN) recognized that "terminology is not at a standstill, and that future developments will require additions and/oramendments to the definitions of terms", and recommended that the Working Group on Toponymic Terminology continue to function. At the ninth UNCSGN in New York (2007) an Addendum with a total of 23 entries were ratified and approved for insertion in the Glossary. 12 of these were terms in the Glossary whose definitions had been amended, and the other 11 were additional terms not included in the 2002 Glossary.

Both the Glossary and the Addendum are now found on the UNGEGN website.

Working group meetings since 2007

The Working Group on Toponymic Terminology has held four meetings during the period 2007–2012. The first one took place in Vienna, Austria, on 22 May 2008, in connection with the symposium Geonames 2008. Some members of the Working Group also met (the second meeting) with the terminology group of ICOS (International Council of Onomastic Sciences) in Toronto in August 2008. A little more than a year later – in December 2009 – the ICOS terminology group met again in Vienna and as the present convenor of theUNGEGN Working Group I was invited to join their meeting. The venue was organized as a workshopwith free and spontaneous discussions. Wesystematically went through the emerging ICOS terminologylist and compared allthe shared terms with the UNGEGN Glossaryand discussed in depth their meanings anddefinitions.

A third meeting with the UNGEGNWorking Group onToponymic Terminology during the period was arranged in Uppsala,Sweden, on October 27th 2010, combined with a small symposium announced as"Name research and Name policies – some European examples". The mainpurpose of the meeting was to discuss somesuggested additions and amendments to theUNGEGN glossary that had emerged as a result of the joint meeting with the terminology group ofICOS in Vienna in December2009. All UNGEGN experts were invitedto take part in this meeting in Uppsala; some 15 actually came there, most of them representing the Norden Division of UNGEGN.

The ICOS terminology group met in Uppsalain April 2011 with the primary goal to complete the English version of their *List of Key Onomastic Terms*. The list was later the same year translated into German and French. I participated at this event as well, trying as far as possible to argue for the use of common terms and common definitions in the two glossaries. But to harmonize them completely is not an easy task. At the 24th International Congress of Onomastic Sciences, held in Barcelona, Spain, in September 2011, I presented a paper headed "The terminological work of UNGEGN and ICOS – a presentation and a comparison", in which I discussed and compared the two glossaries. What are the similarities and differences? Do we really need two globally working terminogical groups and two term lists at all? My answer is yeswe do, above all because the two lists serve different purposes. In the paper I highlight a few toponymic terms in particular just to illustratethe problems and difficulties connected to the efforts of finding a globally harmonized toponymic terminology.

The fourth meeting with the UNGEGN Working Group took place in Vienna in May 2011 in connection with the 26th Session of UNGEGN. Some of the toponymic terms discussed by the Working Group recently can be seen in WP 87 from that session.

Ongoing and future work

In accordance with resolution VIII/3 the UNGEGN Working Group has continued to discuss a number of the already approved and published terms, as well as terms still lacking in the Glossary, but without proposing that any further amendments and additions be made available in printed form. Instead the Working Group (through Dr. Peder Gammeltoft, Danmark) has started to develop a database on toponymic terminology, based on the printed UNGEGN Glossary (2002) and its Addendum (2007).Currently, an online "proof-of-concept" database is available at: http://onomastics.org/php/top_term2.html. It is possible to search English terms from the 2002 version and have the results viewed in English, Spanish, and French. In its current form, the database is stored in MySQL environment, although other possibilities are also being explored. The major obstacle in the project is differences in encoding of Arabic and Chinese in the original document as compared to that of the English, Spanish, French, and Russian sections (which are encoded in UFT-8).

When the database is fully realized (funding possibilities to be explored), the digitized Glossary will be more flexible, amendments and additions will be much easier to handle, and cross-references and comparisons between the language versions will be quicker. Until then new and

amended toponymic terms and their definitions might be discussedbut no changes in the UNGEGN Glossary will be decided and published.

During the next few years the efforts to find the best toponymic terms with the best definitions will continue within the Working Group and in cooperation with ICOS. The development of a database on toponymic terminologi will be given high priority.

A preliminary version of the database (so far in three of the UN languages: English, French, Spanish) will be demonstrated during the Tenth UNCSGN in New York in 2012.