Economic and Social Council

Fourth United Nations Conference on the
  Standardization of Geographical Names
Geneva, 24 August to 14 September 1982
Item 4 of the provisional agenda*

REPORTS BY DIVISIONS AND GOVERNMENTS ON THE SITUATION IN THEIR
REGIONS AND COUNTRIES AND ON THE PROGRESS MADE IN THE
STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES SINCE THE THIRD UNITED NATIONS
CONFERENCE ON THE STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

Report by Ireland

Paper presented by Ireland

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*   E/CONF.74/1.

GE.82-66131

Report presented by Ireland   Résumé/Resumen

No representative of Ireland attended the Third Conference
in Athens 1977 and no report was presented at that Conference.
It is therefore ten years since the last report (vide Second
United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical
Names, Vol. II, p. 88) and this present report continues from
that point.

To begin it may be relevant to quote Guatemala in the
volume mentioned (pp. 66 - 67): "It is well known that the
Standardization of Geographical names is exceedingly difficult
and that it is impossible, in many cases, to achieve any
practical results.   As an example, it should be sufficient
to recall that the writer, at the closing meeting of the First
United Nations Conference at Geneva, remarked that, owing to
an irony of fate, it had not been possible to decide on one of
the many official names of the beautiful Swiss City in whose
Palais des Nations we had met, and that the city continued to be
known as Genf, Ginevra, Geneve, Geneva and Ginebra".   Assuming
that this observation of Guatemala's is correct it seems
realistic to conclude that variant written forms of geographical
names will continue to exist as long as various linguistic
groups continue to be in contact.

Exonyms

According to definition 39. in the glossary presented by
the Group of Experts on Geographical Names (Vol. II, p. 234,
Report of the Third Conference) an exonym is a geographical

name used in a certain language for a geographical entity situated outside the area where that language has official status and differing in its form from the name used in the official language or languages of the area where the geographical entity is situated". This definition seems to be confined to languages having written forms of names and having official status accorded to these written forms. The word official is defined in the glossary as explicitly sanctioned by a legally constituted entity (no. 98, p. 238). At any particular time this definition would apparently not function in the case of a number of languages which might happen to be deprived of official status or to lack a recognised system of writing.

The exonym is thus usually regarded as a feature of international relationships only and as such is regarded in each case as an isolated example in a sea of homogeneity. However, under circumstances, and even under administrations, admitting more than one language, exonyms may multiply up to the point where the term exonym is no longer appropriate because multilingual conditions are commencing to exist. A particular administration, from sympathy, or even from policy, may recognize more than one language and more than one form for names. Also, it is often normal for names to be transparent, that is meaningful, in one language while opaque or nonmeaningful in another language. Such circumstances, which are not rare in the world, have particular relevance to items 5 (National Standardization), 11 Exonyms) and 13 (Writing Systems) on the Provisional Agenda for this Conference. The concept of multiple official versions of placenames might

The United Nations, implies diversity.   Furthermore it can
hardly be denied that the tendency of independent states to
group themselves into blocs voluntarily, for whatever stated
purpose, gives rise to situations where standardization cannot
be achieved except by a certain degree of coercion.

The official languages

A not unusual situation exists in Ireland, as shown in
the report of 1972.   The vast majority of geographical names
have their origin in the Irish language but until recently only
anglicised forms and English-language names had been officially
recognised.   The Irish solution is to give two languages
official recognition.   At present the dominant language is
English but many people use Irish also, either traditionally
or as a language acquired by study.   These two languages,
English and Irish, are entirely distinct and linguistically
are as far removed from each other as French is from German.
The Irish language is a member of the Celtic branch of the
IndoEuropean group and has existed in Ireland since prehistoric
times, that is, for at the very least two thousand years. Its
earliest documentation consists of inscriptionsoon stone dating
from circa 300 A.D.;   its earliest written matter dates from
circa 700 A.D. and among its most valued early texts are some
from the 8th century which have been preserved for over one
thousand years in the city of Sankt Gallen at the opposite
extreme of Switzerland from Geneva.   In contrast, the English
language was first introduced to Ireland circa 1200 A.D. by
followers of French-speaking Norman colonisers but did not
spread widely among the population until about two hundred
years ago.

At the beginning od the 17th century the native Irish
institutions and forms of administration were completely
suppressed and from then on the native Irish language was
entirely ignored as a written language in all forms of govern-
ment in Ireland. All personal names and placenames were
deliberately rendered into an English form so that in many
cases the original names were disguised and often unrecognis-
able.

When the modern independent state of Ireland acquired
international recognition in the 20th century the new state
adopted a policy of bilingualism. The effective modern status
of English was recognized but it was also believed that in
order to maintain a definite independent identity in the
modern world a deliberate policy would be required which would
be consistent with the spiritual and cultural aspects of the
philosophy of Independence. It was logical therefore to
cultivate the Irish language as part of the distinct Irish
identity. For a few decades the problem of identifying and
restoring the placenames after so long a period of deprivation
was left to individual scholars but eventually it was realised
that the task was too great no matter how willing or talented
the voluntary workers were. A Commission, An Coimisiún
Logainmneacha, was appointed in 1946 to advise the government
and subsequently professional staff was provided to do the
necessary research.

The proper Irish forms of the names are now determined
on the basis of intensive research which covers many discip-
lines mainly in the fields of language and history over a

on the work and the centre of research is at the Office of the Ordnance Survey, where a research staff of eight fulltime Placenames Officers is maintained. This staff is recruited at the level of University research. The Chief Placenames Officer also acts as secretary to An Coimisiún Logainmneacha. The work, which might be termed linguistic archaeology, is constantly producing new information and provides an ancillary service to many academic activities.

At first the principal task was to study the names of the main centres of administration and the main physical features. This was generally achieved by about 1970. In 1973 an Act of Parliament was passed under which an order has since been made giving full legal status to the official Irish form of the names of the post-towns. At present the day-to-day research-work is directly linked to the publishing schedule of the Ordnance Survey and since 1930 it is the practice for the Ordnance Survey to provide the official Irish form for every important placename, including all administrative placenames, and to incorporate this along with the official English form on the new bilingual metric series of Ordnance Survey maps at scale 1:2500 which is currently being produced. It is intended to publish in book form with critical analysis the historical evidence for all administrative and geographical names totalling over 60,000 -- but excluding street-names. At present systematic research has been completed on administrative areas comprising 4000 names and these are being edited for publication. Research is well advanced on areas comprising 7000 names. In relation to Ireland, therefore, until the work of ascertaining the original names has been completed to a resonable degree, the question of international standardization

It may not be necessary to legislate for the Irish names officially published on these maps as the names refer to delimited areas which already bear an official English form. Interestingly there is no record, even from the former asminstration, of any legislation intended to give official status to the English forms.

The opaque/transparent situation referred to above is very obvious now, as the difference between the English and the proper Irish forms is usually one of orthography. The English forms are generally only ciphers representing names which have obvious meanings in their Irish forms.

Modern names in urban areas have mostly originated in English. Street-names, in particular, may be classed as administrative placenames, although not at national level since they are the responsibility of local government authorities. Their more transient dedicatory nature differs generally from that of the the traditional historic placename. Is is usual for the local government authorities to supply the Irish form of geographical names of this type.

Policy in bilingual naming

This policy of bilingualism in relation to placenames stimulates awareness of history at various levels. In fact, placenames as such appear to be one of the subjects most fundamentally interesting to people of all kinds. But of course there is a more important side to such a policy. In Ireland it is supported by a determination to re-establish a national identity which was practically submerged and in

pertain to the human heritage in general and are as serious as
any similar threats to the natural environment.   Endeavours
to resist such extinction are surely worthy of genuine support
and sympathy.   The United Nations Organisation in itself is
a monument to such endeavours.

Multilingual policies, undoubtedly, do not aid the practice
of standardization.   Such policies aim to deal in a moderate
way with problems which are often immoderate.   In fact a prob-
lem may be seen to exist only by those who have a moderate or
equitable attitude to a given situation.   In many cases the
question of standardization of geographical names may be purely
routine for one agency while being intimately bound up with
the history and aspirations of another.   This is a fact which
it is unwise to ignore.   It will not go away.

Transcription

The question of reproducing names in scripts differing
from that of the language of the original name has been treated
of in various contributions to these Conferences.   Some, in
particular, have drawn attention to such unsatisfactory processes
as the 'triangular situation', where names in one language are
written or even pronounced in another language using a third
language as a literal or as a phonetic bridge, despite the
distortion which normally results from such an inaccurate and
unscientific method.

In the production nationally of world-gazetteers involving
a transition from script to script and also of gazetteers
giving a recommended pronunciation, the compilers often find
it easier to copy exemplars which already exist (although

frequently far from exemplary) rather than seek the correct official phonetic values from the relevant authorities. This is extremely unprofessional and discredits those who practice it. The Ordnance Survey in Dublin will gladly supply accurate phonetic versions for all required placenames in Ireland for both Irish and English forms. This Aspect of gazetteers is one which demands the fullest scientific accuracy and particularly so when the number of names concerned is usually comparatively small.

Standardization

Finally to return to standardization, it is acknowledged that language is one of the basic talents given to man. The recognition of symbols and the interpretation of scripts is a secondary acquisition. The conversion of these symbols into sounds depends on many variables. Perhaps it might be worth investigating the possibility of achieving standardization through the use of numerals or some other device which has already a sufficiently precise international currency. This may hold a solution when it is considered that reading is more and more becoming a function of electronic scanning.