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Item 11
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MEETING OF THE WORKING GROUP ON ROMANIZATION SYSTEMS

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR
CHANGES IN THE ROMANIZATION OF HEBREW

Submitted by Prof. N. Kadmon, Chairman, Eastern Mediterranean
Division (other than Arabic),

UNITED NATIONS

Group of Experts on Geographical Names

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ROMANIZATION SYSTEMS

Theoretical and Practical Considerations for Changes in the Romanization of Hebrew

(Submitted by Israel*)

UNITED NATIONS
GROUP OF EXPERTS
ON GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

Eighteenth Session, Geneva, August 1996

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR CHANGES IN THE ROMANIZATION OF HEBREW

Paper submitted by Israel

The rules for the romanization of Hebrew were developed by the Academy of the Hebrew Language in the mid-1950's, and approved by the Knesset (Parliament) in late 1956. They were published in the Official Gazette No. 519 of 23 January 1957. In 1977 these rules were submitted to the 3rd U.N. Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in Athens, and, in Resolution No. 15 of the Conference, recommended "to be adopted as the international system for the romanization of geographical names in the Hebrew alphabet". The complete transliteration table, to which reference will be made in this paper, was appended as an annex to the above-mentioned Resolution. They can also be found in *Resolutions adopted at the six United Nations Conferences for the Standardization of Geographical Names, 1972, 1977, 1982, 1987, 1992*, prepared for the United Nations by the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names [1994].

In Document E/CONF.85/.4, titled "The legal status of official endonyms in Israel" submitted to the 6th United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, 1992, the undersigned remarked that while Government agencies and institutions, headed by the national survey and mapping organization, the *Survey of Israel*, as well as the road signboarding authority, adhered strictly to these rules, various private and other non-official bodies did not. Since it was felt that after some 40 years of practical experience a revision might be considered, the *Mapping Council of Israel* decided to set up an Advisory Committee on Map Script, chaired by Prof. N. Kadmon, in order to investigate whether the existing rules warranted any changes, and if the results be affirmative, to propose any changes deemed necessary.

One of the reasons for the re-assessment of the romanization of Hebrew is of a pragmatic character. The *Survey of Israel*, the producer of the official maps of the country and principal "user" of toponyms, is at present in an advanced stage of setting up the national G.I.S. (computerized geographic information system). At any other stage the re-transliteration and re-printing of many thousands of geographical names in hundreds of map sheets – topographic, small-scale, thematic and atlas – would hardly even be considered. But producing a completely *ab initio* series of computer-generated digital maps makes this operation feasible. Furthermore, automation makes it possible to introduce late changes even at a later stage. However, this latter facility also constitutes a drawback, because it might act agains the stability of any system adopted, and this point must be taken into consideration.

In the past, the Academy of the Hebrew Language distinguished between a "precise" and a "simple" romanization method. The former was intended for (and is used in) scientific, literary and librarian work. The latter was intended, *inter alia*, to serve in maps. This distinction will be followed in the future, too. It is still felt that maps and road signs transliterated (and in the case under review,

romanized) from the original Hebrew script have, as the primary goal, the conveying to the prospective reader the *approximate* sound of a name. A person interested in the original spelling is directed to original maps in Hebrew or to the appropriate linguistic literature.

When the Academy of the Hebrew Language decided on its romanization system, it tried to follow a "traditional" Hebrew pronunciation used chiefly by Eastern ("Sefardi") Israelis. This resulted in the two following consonant transliterations which (among others) are now under critical review.

Perhaps the main stumbling block was considered to be the letter ק, the guttural *k*, equivalent to the later Arabic ق. Following established British practice, this letter was romanized by the letter *q*. However, Western persons (including the numerous tourists visiting Israel, using official maps and following roadsigns) are not used to seeing the letter *q* unless followed by *u*. Thus, they do not recognize *q* as representing an allophone of the /k/ phoneme. Besides, they usually cannot pronounce it correctly – and even most Israelis do not make the distinction between the two /k/ allophones, כ (transliterated by *k*) and ק (transliterated by *q*). Moreover, in Chinese Pinyin the *q* represents IPA /t ʃ /, the *ch* sound, so its phonemic use is not universal.

Transliterating consonantic ו by *w* has also been criticised. Practically only the minority of Israeli linguistic purists of Yemenite descent pronounce this as *w*, everybody else – as English *v*.

Another problematic romanization concerned the letter צ representing the /ts/ phoneme. This, in the old system, was transliterated by underscored *z* . Most speakers of English (and these constitute the majority of tourists in Israel) do not distinguish between this and plain z. The opposite is true of speakers of German, who correctly read this for /ts/, but who do not associate z with the voiced /z/. The substitution of *tz* has been suggested. but since /ts/ ends in the unvoiced fricative /s/, *ts* is at present being considered.

Diacritical signs which are used to distinguish between different phonemes expressed by a single grapheme (such as *z* and *z̧* for /z/ and /ts/, respectively) have two main disadvantages. They are not self-explanatory so that they must be defined in a transliteration table (the same is, of course, true of the unconventional use of letters such as *q* for Chinese ch). And in not a few cases they are difficult to produce on typesetting equipment and word processors (not to mention typewriters), or else, being small, they tend to be lost in the reproduction process, particularly in map printing. In all these cases they lose their meaning. Therefore, one of the aims of a good transliterating system should be to minimize the use of diacritics while still being self-explanatory to a majority of readers.

Romanization of Hebrew employed two such diacritics, namely *z̧* for /ts/ as stated above, and *ḥ* for the guttural allophone of /χ/, roughly the *ch* sound in Scottish *loch* or German *ach*, to distinguish it from plain *h*. No proper substitute for *ḥ* has, as yet, been devised. But the person pronouncing it simply as *h* is not so far off the mark.

The mute stops א and (guttural) ע (to which correspond Arabic أ and ع) will now both be represented by ' instead of by ' and ', respectively, in the past, because the Western reader does not distinguish between them. And it will only be inserted in positions where it actually and vocally divides between letters. Incidently, and strictly speaking, the ' sign is not a diacritic, since it does not *modify* a letter; it is a grapheme which *represents* a letter.

Digraphs, too, are somewhat problematical – as are the diacritical marks which can, and in certain cases do, substitute for them. While *sh* for Hebrew ש, representing the / ʃ / sound, is at least "natural"

for speakers of English, *kh* for the Hebrew undotted כ (the IPA /χ/ sound) is not – in any language. The digraph *ch* has been tried in the past, being understandable to speakers of German and used also in English Bibles (Taanach, Malachi, Machtesh, Michmas, Abimelech and many more). But because of confusion of *ch* by English speakers with the /t ʃ / sound, even in medial and final positions (unpointd כ cannot occur initially), the English convention of *kh* has been adopted, both in Hebrew and in Arabic (for خ). Since "Sassenachs" (Saxons, or simply southern Englishmen to Scots) cannot usually properly pronounce the *ch* in Scottish *loch* and say *lock*, the *kh* convention is understandable.

A further problem is the doubling of consonants carrying a *dagesh hazaq* (similar to Arabic *shaddah*). This is critical in the case of the digraph *sh* and would look incongruous in transliterating e.g. the toponym *Be'er Mashshash*. Since the doubling 's anyway not very marked in speech, it might in the future be abolished in the transliteration of all other consonants too.

The results of the above-mentioned Commission's work, when brought to conclusion, will be brought to the attention of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names. Comments and suggestions by Experts are invited – and indeed welcome – at any stage.

Author's address:
Prof. N. Kadmon,
Department of Geography,
Hebrew University of Jerusalem,
91905 Jerusalem, Israel,
Fax No. (+972) 2-631 625.