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INTERNATIONAL CO-OPERATION

STEPS TOWARDS INTERNATIONAL STANDARDIZATION*

Submitted by the Government of the
United States of America

Many of the States Members of the United Nations have come to agree that international standardization of the writing of geographical names, or at least a greater degree than now obtained, is highly desirable. Several countries have responded to the Economic and Social Council request for ideas on such international standardization with interesting and helpful replies. Two principal methods of obtaining standardization have been proposed: (a) standardization on the forms used by the nation of sovereignty and (b) the use of an international alphabet for all geographical names.

Several international alphabets have been devised in the past. One, the IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet), has rendered good service for many years in linguistic and pedagogic circles. Evaluation of the possible role of an international alphabet in geographical name standardization requires a clear distinction between standardized writing and standardized pronunciation. Uniform writing is here the objective; such aid to pronunciation as is feasible

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and compatible with uniform writing is desirable but overemphasis on pronunciation should not be allowed either to defeat or obscure the objective.

Fully uniform pronunciation is impossible. Every language has its own unique sound system, never shared with any other language completely if at all. Speakers of one language cannot react to and produce at will all the sound features of another language without intensive linguistic training. Especially will speakers of languages with few sound distinction (phonemes) be at a loss to reproduce sounds they have never heard before from languages with a greater number of phonemes. Mere symbols will not help one to pronounce strange sounds. Furthermore, although an "international alphabet" is usually thought of as representing with a different symbol every different significant sound in all the principal languages of the world, one that fully covered only the principal languages would be so enormously complicated and cumbersome as to defeat its purpose. It is in point that almost all writing systems employ conventions, since few alphabets represent, in a completely systematic way, the sounds of even the language or languages which they are regularly used to write.

Replacement of writing systems in present general use by an international alphabet is more unlikely. Judging from resistance in various countries in modern times to proposed orthographic reforms, proposals to introduce completely new alphabetic symbols (in contradistinction to modifications of present symbols) for supplementary special use in writing geographical names would also be unlikely to receive ready acceptance.

Written names are generally more widely recognizable within a writing system than are spoken names. Dialectical variations in pronunciation do not negate visual recognition by literate people. Written forms of unfamiliar names that invoke pronunciations that do not approximate local pronunciations closely are still acceptable; written forms containing sequences of symbols that appear unpronounceable will be acceptable if the user can learn how to pronounce them in some fashion or rarely has to say them at all.

A practical programme looking toward international standardization must take full account of the linguistic and cultural limits set by present-day conditions. In the last few years it has been generally recognized that the practical impossibility of uniformity in spoken rendition of geographical names

does not preclude a high degree of uniformity in writing them. People all over the world now have occasion to refer to, identify, or even go to places that their ancestors either never heard of or considered so far away and inaccessible as to be of no concern. It has become increasingly evident that the old gradual process of bending names from other sound systems into written forms compatible with the system of the receiver language, producing what we call "conventional" names, was consistent with the ideas, attitudes and limited geographic needs of earlier times. That process is inconsistent with today's concepts of international co-operation and of respect for people who speak other languages, and inconsistent with the enormously greater number of geographical names with which people must deal.

It has also become apparent in recent years that the toponymic problems of one country commonly recur in other countries. This suggests that each country has something to gain from comparison of such problems and of the efficacy of efforts to solve them, since the experience of each country is relevant to comparable problems in other countries. Such experience means individual efforts as well as collective efforts by groups or Governments. A sharing of this experience and comparison of problems would be highly profitable.

In light of the facts and conditions mentioned above, the following steps appear practical, feasible and internationally acceptable. They would bring about a much higher degree of international standardization than exists today.

I. It is proposed that an international conference be held under appropriate United Nations auspices on the problems of the international standardization of geographical names and that said conference refer back its findings to the Economic and Social Council for use in further planning and for reference to the regional conferences mentioned below.

II. It is proposed that the regional conferences be based on the following writing systems:

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| 1. Roman alphabet | 8. Tibetan alphabet |
| 2. Cyrillic alphabet | 9. Burmese alphabet |
| 3. Greek alphabet | 10. Siamese (Thai) alphabet |
| 4. Hebrew alphabet | 11. Chinese |
| 5. Amharic alphabet | 12. Japanese |
| 6. Arabic alphabet | 13. Korean |
| 7. Indic alphabet | |

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Several of the writing systems are used to write more than one language. The Roman, Cyrillic, Arabic and Siamese alphabets are used with extra symbols in addition to the basic ones in some languages, and with different sound values for at least some symbols within an alphabet group. However, in the main the principles operating within an alphabet group are the same and are the basis of classification. Although the Indic alphabet group actually includes many alphabets, all are ultimately based on the Sanskrit alphabet and operate on the same principle.

It is further proposed that regional working group conferences be set up under appropriate United Nations auspices, at which the nations in each writing system group involving more than one country would discuss the place name problems of the group. It would probably be helpful for observers from other writing systems to attend such working conferences. It sometimes happens that transcription or transliteration draws attention in a useful way to inadequacies in the donor languages for the writing of geographical names. Such attendance would also serve as a reminder that each working conference is part of a larger plan. It is suggested that, in the interest of international standardization, each nation in each writing system group should establish the names and spellings of its own place names and make them available to other nations, particularly to other nations within its writing system group. If each nation in the group would accept the place name spellings of the other nations in the group, standardization within one writing system would automatically result. Within each writing system each nation would have to decide for itself, or in concert with other nations using the same language, whether to retain the diacritical marks and modified letters used in writing other languages of the group but not by themselves, or to "transliterate" such symbols; e.g., Roman alphabet nations would decide either to reproduce Icelandic *ð* and *þ* or to transliterate them, for instance, by dh and th respectively.

Each nation would have to decide which conventional spellings or names for places outside its own jurisdiction it wishes to retain in addition to the proper spelling in the area where the place is. Each nation would also have to decide many problems relating to place names within its jurisdiction, including its possessions, such as which language or languages are official in the country or possession as a whole or in specified parts, and how to treat names from minority languages within its boundaries.

Users of each writing system should transcribe or transliterate, whichever is linguistically appropriate, the place names of other writing systems. Agreements on transcription and transliteration systems between the nation of origin and the nations into whose writing system names are taken is highly desirable and to be encouraged in the interest of international co-operation, but the needs of the receiver nations should be regarded as paramount. Here again the nations in each writing system should at least consider transcribing or transliterating uniformly the names from other writing systems.

Changes in the orthography of a language, or either a national or an international basis, should be respected and be reflected in international usage wherever feasible. It is recommended that orthographic reforms be made in the direction of improvement in the relationship between sound and symbol.

It is recommended that the United Nations make linguistic, geographical and other technical toponymic advice available, as desired, to the personnel of regional conferences mentioned above.

Geographical names are known to be subject to change, but it would be possible to make the nomenclature of every area of the world more stable and to achieve a higher degree of standardization if the groundwork in the compilation of place names by each nation is carefully done. It is therefore recommended that advice, such as described in the preceding paragraph, be made available by the United Nations to nations that request it.

The proposed steps would not accomplish international standardization of geographical names overnight, but each would lead in that direction and the initial steps are all feasible.
