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DECISION RELATING TO MULTILINGUAL AREAS*
(Ref. Recommendation VII of the Experts' Report E/3441)

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(Item 9c of the provisional agenda)

DECISIONS RELATING TO MULTILINGUAL AREAS

(Ref. Recommendation VII of the Experts' Report E/3441)

A. The areas involved will include:-

1. Countries where two or more languages have equal official status (e.g. Canada, Belgium, Finland, Ireland, Switzerland, Yugoslavia^{*})
2. Federations in which constituent states have their own languages (e.g. India, Pakistan, U.S.S.R.)
3. Countries where minor languages are spoken that have little or no local use officially.

As far as A1 is concerned the problem is comparatively simple: standardized names follow the language of origin, e.g. names in Dutch-speaking areas of Belgium are written in Dutch and those in French-speaking areas in French. It will normally be the case that the names of the more important cities and features in such a country will exist in both languages, e.g. Basel/Bâle/Basilea, Helsinki/Helsingfors, Saint Lawrence/Saint Laurent.

The situation in A2 presents rather more problems. It will usually be the case that the basic mapping of the territory is done in terms of a single official or administrative language and it will be convenient if standardization of names follows the same practice. Each constituent state will also probably produce maps and/or gazetteers with names given in the local language, e.g. Ukrainian in the Ukrainian S.S.R., Bengali in East Pakistan. It is desirable that such local names be given as part of the supplementary information in a national gazetteer.

Nearly every state will have at least one minor language spoken within its borders, e.g. Canada (Eskimo), Iran (Kurdish), Japan (Ainu), Morocco (Berber), Netherlands (Frisian), Norway (Lappish), United Kingdom (Welsh). Many countries in Asia and Africa will number such languages by the score, or even, in the case of India, by the hundred.

B. All the areas mentioned under A2 and A3 above will therefore face, to a greater or lesser extent, the question of standardizing names from minor languages. The problems involved, which may often be extremely complex and difficult of solution, may be categorized broadly as follows:-

* In Yugoslavia there are also two scripts having equal status.

1. The minor language is written:
 - (a) in the same script as the principal language, or
 - (b) in the same script as the principal language but modified in respect of diacritics and/or additional letters, or
 - (c) in a different script.
2. The minor language is unwritten.

There is also a third problem which, though it does not affect national standardization within a country, may be of importance from the point of view of international standardization:-

3. The minor language is spoken in two or more neighbouring countries:
 - (a) and written in the same system of orthography
 - (b) in different systems of orthography
 - (c) is unwritten

Where the minor language is a written one with a stable orthography the collection of names may present no particular problem. But the question of how best to deal with such names on national mapping or in a national gazetteer will generally be one of considerable difficulty. Paradoxically there is greater difficulty when the minor language is written in the same script as the principal language (1a and 1b) than when it is not (1c). For though acceptance of minor language names without change is ideal:

- (i) from the linguistic point of view, in that it preserves the original name undisguised, and
- (ii) from the standardization point of view, in that it keeps the number of variant spellings of the same name to a minimum,

such names may be unpronounceable or incomprehensible to those unfamiliar with the minor language concerned. For example, names in the Welsh and Gaelic-speaking areas of the United Kingdom are spelled in accordance with Welsh and Gaelic orthography on Ordnance Survey maps, though the latter language in particular presents extreme difficulties of pronunciation for the ordinary English speaker; by contrast, names in Catalonia spelled in accordance with Catalan orthography on Spanish maps do not present quite the same degree of difficulty to Spanish speakers. In practice such a policy is only applied to lesser places and features since the more important will already have established conventional names in the principal language.

The alternative solution to problems 1(a) and (b) is to rewrite the minor language name in terms of the orthography and phonetics of the principal language; this generally, though by no means necessarily, involves translating generic terms and other commonly occurring elements (e.g. old/new, upper/lower) from the minor language into the principal language, e.g. as in the Republics of the Soviet Union. This solution has the merit of making minor language names both pronounceable and comprehensible to the users of

the principal language. But one particular disadvantage is that "transcription" of one language in terms of another using the same script seems more prone to arbitrary phonetic improvement and less easily susceptible to fixed rules than is transliteration from one script to another. There is often considerable difficulty in finding adequate single-word translations of generic terms from the minor language.

Whichever of these two solutions is adopted it is essential that the national gazetteer contain, in the first case, details of pronunciation and an explanatory glossary of generic terms and meaningful elements (such as those produced by the Ordnance Survey for Welsh and Gaelic); and in the second, details of the full form of the name in the minor language.

Where the minor language is written in a script different from that of the principal language - case 1(c) above - a transcription system from one to the other must be devised. The particular linguistic problems to be faced here are dealt with in another paper. From the point of view of standardization, it matters less whether the system adopted is one of strict transliteration or simple transcription than that full details of it should be given in the national gazetteer.

In the case of languages which are unwritten - 2 above - it will always be more satisfactory to collect names in a phonetic notation for analysis and subsequent consistent expression in terms of the principal language, than to record them directly into the orthography of the principal language. (For a useful illustration of what is involved in the treatment of numerous minor languages in a national gazetteer, see the appendix to Diccionario Geográfico de Guatemala).

In the case of B3, it would be desirable as far as possible where the same minor language is spoken in two or more neighbouring countries that names should be treated in the same way, but differences in culture, dialect or orthography may often be such as to render this unpracticable (e.g. Lappish names in Norway, Sweden and Finland).