UNITED NATIONS
GROUP OF EXPERTS ON
GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

Working PaperNo. 1

Twenty-second Session
New York, 20 -29 April 2004

Item 16
of the Provisional Agenda

MEETING OF THE WORKING GROUP ON PRONUNCIATION

The Need for Pronunciation Guides for Geographical Names – Steps Towards a Solution*

***Prepared by Prof. Naftali Kadmon (Israel), Chairman, East Mediterranean Division (other than Arabic)**

–

The Need for Pronunciation Guides for Geographical Names – Steps Towards a Solution

This paper follows the adoption – in theory – of resolution 11 of the Eighth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in Berlin, 2002.

Theory is one thing – practice is another. The need for clarification regarding the pronunciation of "foreign" geographical names has been mentioned in rather general terms at sessions of UNGEGN and at U.N. Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names in the past. Somewhat vague in its wording was resolution 7 of the third conference (Athens, 1977) which stated "that the Group of Experts consider the nature and design of research and experimentation that may help to establish the range of pronunciation". This was not followed up by practical action.

Every geographical name has, or should have, two forms, (a) the spoken form and (b) the written one. These are expressed in two different modes or media, the first in oral communication, the second graphically in one or more writing systems. The standardization of geographical names (which is the task of UNGEGN and the conferences) has to be, and is being, conducted at two geographical levels. The first is the national level; here a national authority must standardize the written form of endonyms in the script of its country, readable and pronounceable by its citizens. The second is the international level, at which the United Nations request countries with non-Roman writing systems to provide agreed romanization systems, i.e. transliteration rules of their characters into Roman script. The extensive output of the UNGEGN working group on romanization is of importance, among others, to editors of maps, atlases and other publications involving geographical names in Roman script, but also to those editors of maps in non-Roman scripts who use romanized maps and atlases as the basis of their work (instead of working directly from the numerous "foreign" scripts), as indeed do most atlas editors.

Why theory against practice? Romanization, and transliteration in general, does not solve a basic problem: how a speaker of language *x* should pronounce names he reads in a form romanized from script *y*. Transliteration keys enable the transfer of names from one script to another, but many letters represent different phonemes (sounds) in different languages, and what is more – diacritical marks or signs used widely in transliteration are often not understood or not correctly interpreted phonetically by the reader. Consider the following four examples.

(1) The English editor of an officially romanized map of Russia must instruct readers of the map, for example, that the diacritically-marked letter *š* should be pronounced not as *s* but as English *sh*. Even a concise pronunciation table would make this clear.
(2) The French editor of a tourist map of Spain wishes to inform users of his map who have to ask for road directions how to pronounce names having the digraph *ll* or the diacritic *ñ* in them. It would be of advantage if he added a Spanish-to-French pronunciation guide in the map legend.
(3) The editor of toponymic guidelines for map editors and other editors in country *z* wishes to convey to readers how geographical names in his country are pronounced and not only read, and to do this for the working languages of the United Nations. Again, a pronunciation guide for the three languages would supply a solution.
(4) The Roman letter *q* (which, without a following *u*, is generally not understood by the average "western" reader) used in the romanization of various languages is pronounced as a guttural *k* in Arabic and Hebrew, approximately as *ch* in Chinese and as a click-sound in some African languages. Proper pronunciation guides for these languages are thus needed.

It is, therefore, desirable that pronunciation guides be nationally prepared, and accepted by UNGEGN and confirmed for international use by the U.N. Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names.

A first paper with detailed proposals and specifications for a solution of this problematic topic was presented by Israel at the Eighth Conference held in Berlin in August-September 2002, in conference paper E/CONF.94/CRP89 [1]. That paper also submitted a proposed text for a resolution to set up a working group on pronunciation within UNGEGN, which was adopted by the conference. The conference thereupon recommended acting upon the proposal [2] and adopted the proposed text verbatim as resolution VIII/11 [3], thus establishing the working group.

But here we return to the question of theory as opposed to practice and practicability. The problem to be solved is not a simple one, but rather complicated and many-facetted, and can only be solved partially, for two reasons. Reason one is the fact that sounds of one language can be represented by the script of another only approximately. So we can only strive for the ideal reproduction of sounds, but hardly ever achieve it. Let this not deter us; not in vain has it been said that "the best is the enemy of the good". Reason two leads us further into theoretical linguistic space:

In the following schematization, let us denote the number of different scripts by the letter *m*, and the number of languages by *n*. Romanization is a linear operation, involving *m* romanization tables such as those included in the report by the UNGEGN working group on

romanization systems [4]. On the other hand, pronunciation guides are a matrix operation with, basically and theoretically,
***$t = m \times n$* tables to satisfy the needs of the readers of all languages. One can draw such a requirement table by listing *n* language names in a horizontal line of headings, and the list of *m* scripts as the vertical axis. Into each cell thus generated one should fit one pronunciation table, for example "Japanese Katakana to Greek" or "Arabic to Russian Cyrillic". Strictly speaking, only $t = (m \times n) - n$ or $t = (m - 1) \times n$ tables are required, because the guides for the pronunciation of any particular script in its own language would be redundant. In practice, *t* may vary in the case of several languages using the same script.**

Producing *t* pronunciation tables would be a very big task, perhaps overtaxing and overtiming the work of a single working group. But this task can be considered at three levels of extent and complexity, and broken down into three phases which can be approached successively, depending on the amount of work a working group, and especially its convenor, is ready to invest. The first phase would be the preparation of pronunciation tables only for speakers of English. This would result in $t_1 = (m - 1) \times 1 = m - 1$ tables (since English speakers do not require a Roman to English table), and would be a manageable first task for a working group. The second phase would consist of preparing tables for the three working languages of the United Nations, English, French and Spanish, i.e. $t_2 = (m - 1) \times 3 = 3m - 3$ tables (English, French and Spanish all use the same script). The last and highest phase would provide tables for *n* languages and *m* scripts, and would result in $t_3 = (m \times n) - n = (m - 1) \times n$ tables.

For the working group on pronunciation to be able to do its work, UNGEGN and the Conferences must call upon all countries to prepare national pronunciation guides, starting with phase I (for English) and to submit these to the working group and through it to UNGEGN, perhaps via the New York secretariat. The text for a proposed resolution to this effect will be presented to the 9th Conference, but work should start now.

Israel has already supplied to UNGEGN a detailed pronunciation table of its official script, Hebrew, for phase I (see Working Paper No. 2 for the present session), and hopes that other countries will follow suit.

Notes

[1] Proposal for the establishment of a working group on the pronunciation of geographical names (E/CONF.94/CRP.89).

[2] See "Eighth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, Berlin, 27 August–5 September 2002", report of Committee III, paragraph 202, p. 29.

[3] Op. cit., p. 40, Resolution VIII/11, Working Group on the Pronunciation of Geographical Names.

[4] Report on the current status of the United Nations romanization systems for geographical names. Document E/CONF.94/CRP.81, compiled by the UNGEGN Working Group on Romanization Systems, May 2002.

Author's e-mail address:
msnkadmo@mscc.huji.ac.il

D/UNGEGN22_Pronunc..doc