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Notes on the UNGEGN Definitions of „Endonym“ and „Exonym“*

* Prepared by Peter Jordan, Austrian Institute of East and Southeast European Studies, Austria

Notes on the UNGEGN Definitions of „Endonym“ and „Exonym“

The Glossary of Terms for the Standardization of Geographical Names in its current version¹ defines an

- endonym as a “name of a geographical feature in one of the languages occurring in that area where the feature is situated”;
- an exonym as a “name used in a specific language for a geographical feature 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 feature is situated.”

There is an obvious overlap in these two definitions, they are not mutually exclusive. While the definition of the exonym refers to the official status of a language, for the definition of the endonym this is not a criterion. This may well result in the fact that a place name can be classified at the same time as an endonym and an exonym. Cases in point can be found in larger parts of the Austrian province of Carinthia, where Slovene is “one of the languages occurring”, but Slovene is not in all parts of the province an official language. Vienna could be mentioned as another example, since due to larger communities of labour migrants from East-Central and Southeast Europe several languages “occur” (among them Serbian, Croatian, Bosniak, Macedonian, Romanian, Turkish), but just Hungarian, Czech and Slovak have been made official according to the duration of a considerable language community.

To eliminate this overlap, Paul Woodman, the distinguished expert of the United Kingdom, proposed at the occasion of the 2nd meeting of the UNGEGN Working Group on Exonyms in Prague [Praha], September 24-26, 2003,² to replace in the definition of endonyms the term „languages“ by „indigenous languages“ and in the definition of exonyms the term „official language or languages“ by „indigenous language or languages“.³

This would indeed eliminate the overlap between the two definitions and it would also have the fortunate effect that languages of younger migrant communities are not treated in the same manner as languages of indigenous, autochthonous groups residing in an area for generations and having co-generated culture and place names of that area.

However, by using the criterion „indigenous languages“ for the distinction between endonym and exonym, the problem is only transferred to another level, where it is not really easier to solve, since “indigenous” are very frequently also languages of minorities, whose place names have only partly or not at all been standardised so far.

The following new problems may arise, when „indigenous language or languages“ is used as the criterion for the distinction between endonym and exonym:

- (1) The problem of confining the area, where a language is indigenous

¹ UN-Dokument ST/ESA/STAT/SER.M/85, 2002

² WOODMAN, Paul (2003): The UNGEGN Definitions of „Endonym“ and „Exonym“, Paper presented at meeting of the UNGEGN Working Group of Exonyms, Prague, September 24-26, 2003.

³ The full wording of the definitions according to WOODMAN would run: Endonym = Name of a geographical feature in one of the indigenous languages occurring in that area where the feature is situated. Exonym = Name used in a specific language for a geographical feature situated outside the area where that language is spoken, and differing in its form from the name used in the indigenous language or languages of the area where the geographical feature is situated.

While the status of an official language is by definition related to a clearly delimited territory and this is true also for individual standardised names in a certain language, it may well be disputed up to which limits a non-official language is indigenous.

Which number of speakers at a certain place (settlement, commune, district....) is necessary to call a language indigenous? One person, one family, a certain threshold in absolute (e.g. 100 persons) or relative (e.g. 3% of the overall population) figures?

What about places (e.g. towns and cities) near to, but actually outside of what is usually conceived as the area where the language is indigenous, when these places have recently been populated by considerable numbers of speakers of the language, a frequent phenomenon in our era of growing mobility? Common sense will suggest the answer that their language is not indigenous there. But we know situations, where the current area of an indigenous language is just the remnant of a former much wider spread due to historical regression. Also places in this wider area have names in this language or such names could easily be reconstructed and re-activated. Language regression of this kind is frequent and occurred not only in Austria related to Slovene or Alpine Slavonic, but, e.g., also in Germany east of the Elbe River related to Sorabian or Slavonic, and quite recently and suddenly in Poland and in the Czech lands related to German.

What kind of sources should be used to define the number of speakers? Official language censuses? They are sometimes put into question by minorities and not for all countries official language censuses are available. Data collections or estimates provided by minority organisations? In many cases larger gaps occur between different kinds of sources giving rise to political conflict.

Is the fact of a sufficient number of speakers of an indigenous language only relevant for the names status in this very settlement or also for other settlements in the commune, district or province? Is it relevant also for names of physical-geographical features, and if yes, to which extent or radius?

(2) The problem of selecting among several name variants

If non-standardised names may be taken into account as endonyms, should the name in the standard language be used or a dialect form? In some cases also the name used by locals differs from the name used by people in the surroundings.

(3) The problem of getting involved into unsolved minority questions

In not a small number of countries linguistic minorities have not an adequate status, their language is not acknowledged or they are not acknowledged at all. Defining their place names as endonyms may prompt political objection and dispute.

Proposal: to distinguish between endonym and exonym by the criterion of standardised names

Using the existence of a standardised name as the criterion of distinction between endonym and exonym means to avoid all the problems mentioned above and to be certain about the form of the endonym.

“Standardised names” is the more practicable criterion than “official language or languages”, since there exist official languages, which have no or only a few standardised names in the sense of names sanctioned by a names authority.

It is therefore proposed to modify the current definitions of endonym and exonym in the Glossary of Terms for the Standardization of Geographical Names into
(for endonym) “standardised name of a geographical feature in one of the languages occurring in that area where the feature is situated”
and (for exonym) “name used in a specific language for a geographical feature differing in its form from the standardised name(s) used in the language or languages of the area where the geographical feature is situated.”