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Item 15 of the Provisional Agenda:
Activities relating to the Working Group on Pronunciation

<u>A Basic Model for Pronunciation Guides</u>

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A Basic Model for Pronunciation Guides

At the Eighth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, Berlin, 2002, Israel proposed establishing a Working Group on Pronunciation (Conference Paper E/CONF.94/CRP.89) [1], in accordance with which, resolution 11 was formulated and adopted. Under the sub-heading "The problem of pronunciation" the *raison d'être* for such a working group, dealing with the <u>spoken</u>, and not the <u>written</u>, form of toponyms was presented. In the same paper a first basic multi-layered scheme or framework for the Working Group was proposed.

Then, at the 22nd session of UNGEGN in 2004, a more detailed explanation of the proposed scheme was presented in Working Paper No. 1, "The need for pronunciation guides for geographical names – steps towards a solution" [2].

Working Paper No. 2 of the same session of UNGEGN supplied a practical case study, the first to be submitted to the Working Group on Pronunciation, "Pronunciation guide for Hebrew geographical names" [3].

Up to the time of writing (October 2005), the undersigned is not aware that anything has been done to implement the resolution, or that terms of reference have been formulated since the setting up of the Working Group on Pronunciation. In an appeal to members of the working group the convenor on 4 October 2005, in preparation for the 23rd Session of UNGEGN, proposed that "the first task of the working group will be to agree on a work plan for implementation ….. The work plan should specify practical means for addressing these issues."

In order to contribute to such a work plan and to possible terms of reference for the working group, the undersigned does here repeat some of the points made in the above-mentioned papers, apologizing for the repetition, and adding some others.

Where are pronunciation tables required – some examples

(1) 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, at least for the special letters.

(2) 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 (in this case, such as a romanization table) would make this clear.

(3) The editor of toponymic guidelines for map editors and other editors in country *z* which uses Roman script (but not English) 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. The U.N.-approved romanization tables would be irrelevant in this case.

(4) The Roman letter **q** (without a following **u**) 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. Here, again, official romanization would serve only speakers of English and not those of other languages.

The main problems

Here we come to the question of theory – setting up a working group – as against practice and practicability of filling it with meaningful contents. The problem of pronunciation to be solved is not a simple one, but rather complicated, many-facetted and even multi-dimensional, and can only be solved partially, for several 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". Another reason is that in many cases there is more than one pronunciation of a particular toponym, and standard forms must be selected. These two reasons are of a phonetic character. But there is another problem which is a quantitative one, and has been dealt with in Working Paper No. 1 of 2004, [2]. We will return to it below.

Romanization tables, and transliteration in general, if not accompanied by detailed pronunciation directives, do 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 in names conversion specific 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. The phonetic notes appended to romanization tables, sometimes scanty and sometimes more detailed, strive to solve this part of the problem but do so only partially. Some examples are "Alphabets of foreign languages" (U.K., 1933) [4], "Romanization systems and Roman-script spelling conventions" (U.S., 1944) [5], and "Report on the current status of United Nations romanization systems for geographical names" (UNGEGN, 2003) [6]. These are all directed at readers/speakers of English. But although they cover many "foreign languages", none deals e.g. with readers/speakers of two of the official languages of the United Nations, namely French and Spanish – simply because these employ the Roman alphabet (with some variations), as do German, Italian, Dutch, the Scandinavian and some Slavic languages as well as others. Still, these romanization tables form a good basis for the work of the Working Group on Pronunciation. The last one mentioned [6] covers the very impressive number of 45 languages (!), and there are already more being processed by the Working Group on Romanization led by convenor Peeter Päll (Estonia).

The following notes divide the problems to be dealt with by the Working Group on Pronunciation into two parts. The first is the question of numbers, while the second deals with the phonology , i.e. the representation of the phonetic s particular to each individual language. Turning to the first, the purely theoretical treatment offered in Working Paper No. 2, 2004 [2] is here repeated in slightly different terms.

A problem of numbers

In the following schematization, let us denote by n the number of "user languages" for the use of which pronunciation guides have to be prepared, and by m the number of "source languages" (represented by their scripts) the pronunciation of whose geographical names has to be made clear to speakers of any one of the n "user languages". Romanization is a straightforward "vectorial" operation; here $n = 1$ with m romanization tables; in item [6] above, $m = 45$. On the other hand, pronunciation guides are a matrix operation with, basically and theoretically, $m \times n$ tables to satisfy the needs of the readers of all languages. You can draw such a requirement table by listing n user 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 for speakers of Greek" or "English for speakers of French". 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. This is theory. It should be remembered that different user languages employing the same basic script (e.g. French, Dutch, German, Icelandic etc.) will require separate tables, not only because they may include special characters and letter combinations, but equal letters may have a different pronunciation, in contrast to romanization where such cases are not being dealt with.

One further remark: the term "alphabets" as used in item [4] above is here inapplicable, because languages with syllabic scripts must also be dealt with (e.g. Amharic, Inuktitut, Japanese Kana, Tibetan).

Producing t pronunciation tables would be a very big task, perhaps overtaxing and overtiming the work of a single working group. But the 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 committee or 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, more than in Romanization – because all languages using basically Roman script, e.g. French, Spanish etc. would be involved. This might be a manageable first task for a working group. The second phase would consist of preparing tables for the two remaining working languages of the United Nations, French and Spanish, i.e. an additional $t_2 = m_1 \times 2 = 2m_1$ tables. The last and highest phase would

provide tables for n user languages and m source languages or scripts, and would result in $t_n = (m-1) \times n$ tables.

Is there a "correct" or standard pronunciation?

As mentioned above, sometimes there exist different pronunciations of a single name, even within a particular language, so that different pronunciation guides apply, perhaps for different geographical regions. As just one example, the Arabic letter ? (jim) is pronounced roughly *j* in most Arab countries but pronounced (though not romanized) as hard *g* in much of Egypt. It is thus necessary to obtain, as far as possible, particulars of the standard pronunciation or pronunciations for every language from the respective national authorities, together with examples.

Finally, there is the question of user language script. Languages using Roman script can employ the symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). Basically, the pronunciation tables should be user-friendly as far as possible. They should enable the non-professional user to pronounce as correctly as possible any name read in a map or enquired about for directions from a local person – as in the examples above. Sounds should be represented by examples from the user language (as, of course, is being done in most romanization systems). IPA symbols should therefore be employed, if at all, only as additional aids to pronunciation, not in primary representation.

Summing up, here are the main recommendations to be formed into the terms of reference of the Working Group on Pronunciation.

(1)   As a first stage, pronunciation tables should be prepared for English as a user language.
(2)   A list of source languages should be drawn up.
(3)   Decisions should be taken concerning the standard pronunciation(s) to be adopted in the guides (e.g. for the first stage – English, "American" etc.).
(4)   For the Working Group on Pronunciation to be able to do its work, its convenor and members must call upon all countries to prepare national standard pronunciation guides, taking into account the possibility of different pronunciations, starting with phase 1 (for English) and to submit these to the working group, whose members would be charged with assembling them. The work of the UNGEGN Working Group on Romanization is an excellent model of this type of activity.
(5)   IPA symbols should be employed only as secondary aids.
(6)   Tables for the other two working languages of the United Nations should follow as a second stage.
(7)   Progress reports should be presented by the working group to each UNGEGN session and every U.N. Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names.

N o t e s

[1] "Proposal for the establishment of a working group on the pronunciation of geographical names". Eighth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, agenda item 11. Berlin, Aug.-Sept. 2002, conference paper E/CONF.94/CRP.89.

[2] "The need for pronunciation guides for geographical names – steps towards a solution". UNGEGN, 22nd session, agenda item 16. New York, April 2004, Working Paper No. 1, presented by Israel.

[3] "Pronunciation guide for Hebrew geographical names". UNGEGN, 22nd session, agenda item 16. New York, April 2004, Working Paper No. 2, presented by Israel.

[4] *Alphabets of foreign languages.* Second edition, 1933. Permanent Committee on Geographical Names for British Official Use. Reprinted with incorporation of supplement of 1938 and certain revisions by Marcel Aurousseau. London 1956.

[5] "Romanization systems and Roman-script spelling conventions". Prepared by the U.S. Board on Geographic Names, Foreign Names Committee Staff. Published by the Defence Mapping Agency. 1994.

[6] "Report on the current status of United Nations Romanization systems for geographical names". Compiled by the UNGEGN Working Group on Romanization Systems, Version 2.2, January 2003.