The Audio Guide to the Pronunciation of Geographical Names in the Placenames Database of Ireland[*]

Abstract
This Working Paper describes the audio guide to the pronuciation of certain geographical names in the Placenames Database of Ireland (www.logainm.ie). It outlines the criteria used in the selection of geographical names for inclusion in the pronunciation feature of the database, the methodology in recording the names, and the output of the pronunciation in the database. It also outlines plans to expand the feature in the future.

1. **Introduction.**
    There is general recognition that a geographical name has a spoken form as well as a written form. With the constant development of mass audio-visual communications in recent decades it is reasonable to assume that many members of the public will have heard a geographical name being spoken long before he or she will see it in print, whether on signage, maps, or in the general print media. Changes in society, for whatever reason, over the same period have resulted in a perceptible deterioration in the standard of pronunciation of geographical names on radio and television. This mispronunciation can lead to confusion for the listener, or lead to more more serious consequences in some cases. In order to promote the correct pronunciation of the geographical names of Ireland a decision was taken at the planning stage to include a guide to pronunciation in the recently launched Placenames Database of Ireland (www.logainm.ie). (See separate Working Paper in Item 10 of the Provisional Agenda).

2. **Written guides to pronunciation.**
    The national gazetteer, *Gasaitéar na hÉireann/Gazetteer of Ireland* (1989), provided a phonetic guide using IPA annotation to the pronunciation of the Irish language versions of the country's geographical names. An indication of the position of the syllable stress of the English equivalents is also given. The pronunciation of the Irish forms was based on principles for the general pronunciation of Irish which had been devised by the Linguistics Institute of Ireland. The recommended pronunciation in the gazetteer differed in some instances from the traditional local pronunciation, a fact that resulted in some criticism of the feature. It is proposed that modifications will be made to the next edition of the gazetteer in order to reflect local pronunciation of placenames more.

3. **Selection of names.**
    Following consultation between the Placenames Branch and the developers of the database in Fiontar in Dublin City University, it was decided to record names on a county basis and criteria were agreed for the selection of names for the first phase of recording ending in 2010. For most counties, the lists included the names of administrative units other than townlands, namely, baronies, parishes and electoral divisions, along with all settlement and non-settlement names in the new, soon to be published, edition of *Gasaitéar na hÉireann/Gazetteer of Ireland.* In counties that included a Gaeltacht area (a legally defined traditionally Irish-speaking area), names of townlands within those areas were also included. Both Irish and English versions of the names were to be recorded, except in Gaeltacht areas where only Irish versions were included.

4. **Recording of names.**

In order to guarantee high quality results, fluent speakers of both Irish and English are selected to do the recordings. All speakers to date are experienced in broadcasting or in other public speaking, and are native to the particular county for which the recording is undertaken. A list of the geographical names is forwarded to the speaker, who makes an initial recording and submits this to a geographical names expert in the Placenames Branch. The expert listens to the recording and supplies the speaker with feedback, where required, on aspects of the pronunciation of individual names. The final recording is made by the speaker and Fiontar staff in studio using a laptop PC with a high quality sound card and using Speechrecorder software. Speechrecorder has certain advantages for the speaker and also greatly reduces the amount of editing afterwords. The recordings are made and archived in WAV format. Copies of the WAV files are converted in turn to MP3 format and these are attached to names in database. MP3 format has the advantage over WAV format in that in requires much less disc space, an important consideration for users of the internet.

5. **Outcome and future plans.**

It is estimated that by the end of 2010 the Placenames Database of Ireland will contain audio pronunciations of approximately 11,000 geographical names, 8,500 in Irish and English, 2,500 in Irish only. A decision has been made in principle to include the pronunciation of other names in future, the names of all the townlands in particular. The presentation of geographical names in both their written and spoken forms can sometimes be contentious. However, the general reaction to the audio pronunciation feature in the database has been positive so far. Ireland's public service broadcaster, Raidio Telefís Éireann (RTÉ), has incorporated the feature into its internal audio guide for staff to the pronunciation of proper names and the feature received favourable mention on RTÉ's main morning news programme.

The Placenames Database of Ireland provides instant and convenient access to the pronunciation of Ireland's geographical names from anywhere in the world. With a simple click on the speaker icon on the screen the user can hear a geographical name been spoken clearly in both Irish and English again and again. The cost of the recording process is comparatively inexpensive and could easily be cut even more. Further advances in technology will make it possible the near future to access the pronunciation of Ireland's placenames using other applications, by mobile phone in particular.