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Activities relating to the Working Group on Toponymic Data Files and Gazetteers

The Placenames Database of Ireland *

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The Placenames Database of Ireland

Background

The first phase of the Placenames Database of Ireland, www.logainm.ie <<http://www.logainm.ie>>, was launched officially by the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs on 1 October 2008. The primary purpose of the database is to provide standardised Irish language versions of Ireland's geographical names on-line to customers. There has been a growing demand for these from users as a consequence of the enactment of the Official Languages Act 2003 and of the fact that Irish also became an official and working language of the European Union in January 2007. The Official Languages Act gave for the first time equal legal status with their English-language equivalents to Irish versions of the country's geographical names. The Act also places obligations on all public bodies to publish certain documents, including annual reports, in Irish and English or in Irish only and, consequently, Irish language versions are required for all geographical names occurring in these documents. Regulations made under Act regarding the display of geographical names on road and other public signage have added to the requirement for correct Irish language versions.

The Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, which has responsibility for the standardisation of Irish versions of Ireland's geographical names acting on the advice of the Placenames Commission, took the decision to make all the Irish versions of placenames established to date available through a web-based searchable database. To this end, Fiontar, the Irish language interdisciplinary School in Dublin City University, was engaged on contract in 2007 to develop a web-based national database of placenames in cooperation with the Placenames Branch within the Department. Fiontar had already been responsible for the development of the award-winning on-line database of Irish language terminology, www.focal.ie, and was well-qualified for the task.

Objectives of the database

The principal objective of the project is to make available through the internet Irish language placenames that have been approved by the Placenames Branch, searchable under both Irish and English versions. A system to enable simultaneous Irish-English and English-Irish translation of lists of placenames was incorporated into the database to facilitate users such as journalists and translators, students and teachers, historians and researchers in genealogy. Sound files giving the pronunciation of the more important geographical names were included. Information notes pertaining to individual placenames, including archival historical source material, have been included.

Database content

The database currently holds approximately 107,000 geographical names. This figure includes the names of all the historical administrative units, comprising 32 counties, 344 baronies, 2,573 civil parishes, 3,512 electoral divisions, and 61,584 townlands. These figures include the names of the historical administrative units within Northern Ireland. The database also contains the names of over 10,000 non-administrative geographical names and about 24,000 street names. The total number of names will rise to almost 200,000 when all the street names and all the non-administrative geographical names shown on the Ordnance Survey's historical maps of the scale of 1:10,560 are added. The database currently provides official Irish versions for approximately

65,000 of the geographical names and this figure is rising daily. The genitive case of the Irish name-form is provided. Other categories of geographical names will be added in the future, in particular non-official orally transmitted placenames collected in the course of fieldwork. The database is fully searchable by name, or part of a name, in Irish and English.

The placenames are ordered in the database hierarchically according to county, barony, civil parish, electoral division and townland. The central position (centroid) of each townland is given to the nearest metre according to the Irish Grid (IG) co-ordinate system. The grid reference for other features is to the nearest 100 metres. The approximate location of townlands and non-administrative features is shown on an outline map of the country. It is planned to convert references in the Irish Grid co-ordinate system to the Irish Transverse Mercator (ITM) co-ordinate system in the near future in order to align them with the European standard ETRS98, which will align them in turn with the world system for GPS positioning WGS84..

Pronunciation

The database contains MP3 audio files giving the pronunciation of both Irish and English versions of the most important geographical names and this facility will be expanded to include all placenames over the next five years. A full description of the methodology underlying this feature is given in a separate working paper in Item 16 of the Provisional Agenda.

Historical documentation of names

During the course of research to establish standardised Irish versions of geographical names, the Placenames Branch has built a substantial archive of historical forms for individual placenames dating from the seventh century to the nineteenth. These, and other evidence including local pronunciation, were stored in the Placenames Branch's archives in both paper and electronic formats. During the first phase of development of the database, the documentary material for names held in handwritten and typed format was scanned and is currently available to the public as scanned images on the database under "Archival records". During the present phase, the scanned images are being converted to digital files and the data is being transferred to the database along with data held in electronic formats, MS Word, Excel and Access. It is planned that all the documentary evidence for the placenames in the database will be available to the public by the end of 2010. All new evidence is currently being added directly to the database during the course of research. The historical forms will be fully searchable according to source, year, language and constituent elements.

Map feature

It is planned during the present phase to provide a map facility which will give exact locations for geographical names in the database. A decision has been made to use Google Maps in the creation of this facility and the developers in Fiontar have been in contact with Google Maps to this end. It is envisaged that the map facility will be available to the public in the first half of 2010.

Heritage aspect

While its primary purpose is to make available authoritative standardised versions of geographical names, the Placenames Database of Ireland is also designed to provide the public with a comprehensive on-line resource to explore the richness and complexity of Ireland's geographical names and thereby enhance public appreciation of this aspect of the country's cultural heritage. The experience of the Placenames Branch over many years shows that there is a great demand for this type of information. The database has a facility for individuals to submit queries on any aspect of placenames and this has proved to be very popular since the launch. To further advance this feature, short explanatory notes on individual names are being added on a continuous basis (this has been completed for all the names of County Limerick). In addition, longer notes and articles on placenames or placename-elements, published and non-published, are also being made available.

Conclusion

The Placenames Database of Ireland has proved a success on several counts since its official launch. The facility provides a powerful research tool in the programme of standardisation of the Irish versions of Ireland's geographical names and will expedite the programme greatly. The site is of benefit to frequent users of geographical names, such as translators, journalists, broadcasters, and the academic community and it is known that the pronunciation facility is consulted frequently by the national broadcasters. The database is particularly popular with the public. In its first six months of operation the website attracted over 2.5 million visits, approximately 420,000 per month, about a quarter of which are from outside the country, from the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada and Australia mainly. The site has also generated hundreds of queries from users on all aspects of placenames. Further development of the site over the next eighteen months, including the addition of the proposed map facility and a planned educational facility in particular, will undoubtedly add greatly to its appeal.