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Activities relating to the Working Group on Exonyms

Criteria for the use of exonyms – a next approach

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Abstract

This paper presents a scheme of criteria for the decision, whether in a specific case to use or not to use an exonym. It defines conditions, which rather favour or disfavour the use of endonyms or exonyms. Criteria are classified into audience-related criteria, medium-related criteria, feature-related criteria and language-related criteria. For each criterion arguments and occasionally also examples are presented. Only after having checked the whole list of criteria it is possible to conclude, whether in a specific case the use of the endonym or the exonym is more appropriate. Anyway it is recommended that the exonym is – if technically appropriate – to be accompanied by the endonym, should a corresponding endonym exist. It is also emphasized that no new exonym must be invented, that with the use of exonyms which had earlier been endonyms utmost political sensibility is required and that exonyms produce (with a few exceptions) no real benefits in international communication.

1 Introduction

This paper specifies a scheme of criteria that has already in a rudimentary version been presented and discussed at the GeoNames meetings in Frankfurt am Main (2000) (see JORDAN 2000) and Berchtesgaden (2001), has further been elaborated at the 6th UNGEGN Working Group on Exonyms Meeting in Prague [Praha] (2007), has been submitted to the Ninth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in New York (2007) as a Conference Paper (JORDAN 2007) and underwent another intensive discussion at the 8th Working Group on Exonyms Meeting in Timișoara (2008).

An attempt at the 25th UNGEGN Session in Nairobi (2009) to propose an essentially reduced version of this list (JORDAN, WOODMAN & MATTHEWS 2009) as a model for a UN recommendation failed. This failure was due to very divergent opinions on the range of contents and tasks of such a list as well as to opinions that any guidelines for the use of exonyms were not in line with the general goal of the UN to reduce the use of exonyms.

The current version, again modified compared to the list presented in Nairobi and taking into account the discussions in Nairobi as well as at the occasion of the 10th Meeting of the Working Group on Exonyms in Tainach, 28-30 April 2010, was not meant as a next attempt to elaborate an UN resolution, but just to be presented to the next UNGEGN Session as a Working Paper and as a handout for experts and other interested persons looking for advice. It was in this current version not even submitted as a Working Paper of the Working Group Exonyms (WGE), although it has received many inputs from quite a number of WGE experts, to whom the author feels very much obliged. In fact it is a result of the Working Group.

This paper is essentially founded on the works of Josef BREU (see especially BREU 1959 and 1981) and Otto BACK (BACK 2002) as well as on guidelines for the use of exonyms published by BACK et al. 1994. It also adopts many ideas expressed by other prominent names experts like Sungjae CHOO, Helen KERFOOT, Pierre JAILLARD, Philip W. MATTHEWS, Béla POKOLY, Sami SUVIRANTA, Joan TORT, Adriana VESCOVO, Paul WOODMAN, and Bogusław R. ZAGÓRSKI.

Many stimulations were further received through the author's co-operation in a working group of the Austrian Board on Geographical Names (AKO) devoted to a 2nd edition of Guidelines for the Use of Geographical Names in Austrian Educational Media together with Otto BACK, Lukas BIRSAK, Michael DUSCHANEK, Isolde HAUSNER, Ingrid KRETSCHMER and Roman STANI-FERTL.

The paper refers to the latest definitions of the endonym and the exonym in the Glossary of Terms for the Standardization of Geographical Names (KADMON 2007).¹

The following proposal of a list of criteria for the decision whether to use an endonym or an exonym in naming a certain geographical feature departs from the assumption that there is **not a single criterion** on which this decision can be based; that it is to the contrary necessary to check in every individual case a longer list of criteria. The final decision is up to the overall result and the product of weighing the pros and cons.

The following list may serve as such a check-list and may in this way help (as a kind of a guideline) to arrive at well-founded and rational decisions.

¹ **Endonym:** Name of a geographical feature in an official or well-established language occurring in that area where the feature is situated. *Examples:* Vārānasī (not Benares); Aachen (not Aix-la-Chapelle); Krung Thep (not Bangkok); Al-Uqsur (not Luxor).

Exonym: Name used in a specific language for a geographical feature situated outside the area where that language is widely spoken, and differing in its form from the respective endonym(s) in the area where the geographical feature is situated. *Examples:* Warsaw is the English exonym for Warszawa (Polish); Mailand is German for Milano; Londres is French for London; Kūlūniyā is Arabic for Köln. The officially romanized endonym Moskva for Москва is not an exonym, nor is the Pinyin form Beijing, while Peking is an exonym. The United Nations recommends minimizing the use of exonyms in international usage (KADMON 2007, p. 2).

Just to illustrate the procedure in which this list of criteria can and should be used: Examining this list with reference to a specific case in which the decision whether to use an endonym or an exonym has to be felt, it may turn out that a feature is important for the exonym language community (which makes the use of an exonym rather acceptable) and the endonym is difficult to be pronounced by the exonym language speaker (which again makes the use of the exonym rather acceptable), but that the name is not only to be used in communication with speakers of the exonym language, but with a multilingual audience (which disfavours the use of an exonym and makes it in most cases even impossible). In this case the decision will rather be negative for exonym use.

Is, however, the name only to be used in communication with speakers of the exonym language and should also no other criterion disfavour exonym use (e.g. technical means of communication, politically sensitive, endonym belongs to a frequently used trade language etc.), the use of the exonym can be taken into consideration. Even then, the use of a standardized endonym, if such an endonym exists, remains always a rational and justifiable choice.

It has also to be stated in advance that **whenever an exonym is used, an existing endonym should also be communicated**; at least in the largest map scale of an atlas or with the first mentioning of a name in a text. It is always useful to know, how a geographical feature is named by the local population.

It is also important to note that this list of criteria refers only to features, for which an exonym already exists. **No new exonym must be invented**. It should also be avoided to reactivate historical exonyms or exonyms out of wider use.

Especially with exonyms which had earlier been endonyms and which only by change of political domination, migration or population change have shifted from endonym to exonym status, **utmost political sensibility is required**. It should at any rate be avoided to outline by the use of exonyms (on maps) historical borders or historical settlement patterns.

This list of criteria takes full account also of the fact that **exonyms produce no real benefits in international communication**, i.e. in communication between speakers of different languages, **except when used by global and regional *linguae francae* in their very function as trade languages** (e.g. English in international conferences and air traffic) **or with features for which a corresponding endonym does not exist** (e.g. features beyond any sovereignty, historical features lacking a current endonym).

Thus, this list of criteria corresponds to the United Nations resolutions on the use of exonyms (I/10, II/28, II/29, II/31, II/35, II/38, III/18, III/19, IV/20, V/13; see also KERFOOT 2007, UNGEGN website) pleading for avoiding exonyms in international communication and limiting their use in national communication.

Basically, this list of criteria has a **normative character**. It states, under which circumstances the use of an exonym is rather acceptable and in which situations exonym use should rather be avoided.

It is, however, **not inattentive to the actual practical use of exonyms**. Practical use of exonyms may indeed be regarded as a proof of their functionality and it would be unwise not to take this into account when it comes to the definition of guidelines. But not all practical exonym use is well-considered, not in every case it is favourable. It can anyway not be taken as the exclusive orientation mark for good practice. Thus, it also happens that recommendations presented here deviate from (at least occasional) practical use.

2 List of criteria

General precondition: An exonym in common use for a feature is available.

2.1 Audience-related criteria

Exonym use is rather acceptable, if the **audience** is

(2.1.1) monolingual and using the exonym language

The argument: This is the language community acquainted with the exonyms and drawing all the benefits from using them: easy spelling and pronunciation, declination and derivation according to the rules of the exonym language.

(2.1.2) addressed in an unofficial or informal way

The argument: Unofficial and informal communicative situations require less the use of the “official” name.

Examples: Conversation in a round of friends versus an official speech at a conference.

2.2 Medium-related criteria

Exonym use is rather acceptable

(2.2.1) in the context of spoken words or in texts composed of complete sentences compared to more technical means of communication

The argument: Most of the benefits of using exonyms (easy spelling and pronunciation, declination and derivation according to the rules of the exonym language) are consumed when exonyms are used in spoken or written sentences. When place names occur in isolated form and are not embedded into a sentence (like on maps and diagrams, in tables and indices), some benefits decline. Such means of communication have also frequently much more of a technical or scientific character and are also better understandable for users of other languages.

(2.2.2) with means of communication used exclusively outside the area of the endonym language

The argument: Means of communication for use in the area of the endonym language need in the first line the endonym, since the user is on the spot exclusively confronted with the endonym.

Examples: While school and other atlases are predominantly consulted outside the areas shown on their maps, road maps, city plans or GPS are used in the area they represent.

2.3 Feature-related criteria

Exonym use is rather acceptable, if the **geographical feature** to be marked

(2.3.1) is important for the community of the exonym language

The argument: “Importance” is here defined in the most comprehensive sense and always in relation to the community of the exonym language. Important features in this sense will certainly comprise all the most important features also in an objective sense (like continents, oceans, countries, metropolises) but

also features which are less important or even unimportant from an objective point of view. Features in the latter sense may, e.g., be features in close vicinity of the exonym language community or features to which the exonym language community undertains long-lasting economic, cultural and/or political relations. The group of features addressed here comprises in essence the network of intensive and continuous spatial relations an exonym language community has. It is vital for the exonym language community to develop and preserve topographic knowledge on this network. This is facilitated by place names that are easy to be spelled and pronounced and consequently be kept in mind, i.e. exonyms.

(2.3.2) extends across language boundaries

The argument: These features are geographically conceived as an entity, but have more than one endonym. In order to communicate the geographical concept properly it is useful to apply the exonym.

Examples: Continents and large regions, larger physical-geographical features like mountain ranges, major natural and cultural regions, major rivers and lakes, mountain passes, long-distance transport routes (e.g. historical trade and military routes, motorways and highways, railways, transmission lines and pipelines).

(2.3.3) is exclusively historical and does not correspond to a current feature

The argument: A corresponding endonym is not available, not fully congruent with the historical place or with its historical meaning. In many cases there is no other choice than to use the exonym.

Examples: historical empires and states (e.g. Ottoman Empire, Yugoslavia), exgravation sites (e.g. Troy), historical-cultural landscapes (e.g. Hellespontus, Jedisan).

2.4 Language-related criteria

Exonym use is rather acceptable, if

(2.4.1) the endonym is composed of a specific and a semantically transparent generic part

The argument: By translation of the semantically transparent generic part the feature category is clearly communicated to the exonym language speaker. This is not as important on maps, where the feature category is indicated by cartographic symbols or can be concluded on the basis of configuration.

Examples: *Lake Baykal* [*ozero Bajkal*], *Gulf of Antalya* [*Antalya körfezi*], *Kamchatka Peninsula* [*poluostrov Kamčatka*].

Dangers: When the specific and the generic parts of the name are related to each other like adjective and noun, it is not possible only to translate the noun. But if also the adjective would be translated, the name could lose its identity (e.g. *Great Canal* [*Canale Grande*], *Great Plain* [*Gran Chaco*]). Translation of the specific part may even be impossible, when its meaning is not transparent (e.g. *Fruška gora*). Even if the meaning of the specific part is transparent, its translation may lead to an incorrect form (e.g. although the Finnish lake name *Pitkäjärvi* includes the term *järvi* 'lake', it cannot be formed to an English exonym like *Lake Pitkä*). It is also recommended not to translate those generics of an endonym language which have already acquired a certain standing in literature or scientific terminology of the exonym language like *erg*

(Arabic for a 'sand desert') or *polje* (Croatian/Bosnian/Serbian/Montenegrin for a 'karst valley') in many languages.

(2.4.2) the endonym is especially difficult to be pronounced and spelled by users of the exonym language

The argument: Compared to endonyms, exonyms often have the advantage to be pronounced and spelled easier by the user of the exonym language. Apart from this general rule, some endonyms can be especially difficult to be pronounced and spelled by the users of a receiver language and consequently to be properly used and kept in mind. In these cases exonyms have special benefits.

Examples: To the speakers of German the Polish city names *Wroclaw* and *Szczecin* compared to *Opole* or *Torun*.

(2.4.3) the endonym language is not a frequent educational or trade language with users of the exonym language

The argument: When the community of the exonym language is well acquainted with the endonym language, since it is taught in schools and frequently used as a trade language or *lingua franca*, it can also be expected that it roughly knows how to spell and pronounce their names as well as to interpret the meaning of generic terms.

Examples: English, French and Spanish place names as parts of the three most important global languages require the least the use of exonyms.

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UNITED NATIONS GROUP OF EXPERTS ON GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES (UNGEGN):
<http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/conferences.html> (last access 6/1/2011)