

**Twenty-ninth session  
Bangkok, 25 – 29 April 2016**

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**Item 15 of the provisional agenda**

**Activities relating to the Working Group on Pronunciation**

## **Report of the Working Group on Pronunciation \***

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\* Prepared by Tjeerd Tichelaar (Netherlands), Convenor, Working Group on Pronunciation

## **Report of the Working Group on Pronunciation<sup>1</sup>**

### **Summary**

In this report, the background and mandate of the Working Group on Pronunciation is described, followed by a survey of its achievements thus far in the form of working paper contributions to UNGEGN Sessions other than the Reports of the Working Group. Then a summary is given of the points of attention listed at the last meeting of the WG at the 28<sup>th</sup> Session of UNGEGN in New York (2014), which should be taken into account when the Working Group's new directions are defined.

### **Background and mandate of the Working Group**

The Working Group on Pronunciation was created in 2002 in response to resolution 11 of the Eighth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, which noted that (1) a geographical name had both oral and written forms, (2) the transliteration of geographical names from the script of one language into the script of another did not normally provide a guide to the correct pronunciation of such names by persons unacquainted with the source language, and (3) the Third United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in its resolution 7 had recommended taking up the subject of pronunciation. The recommendation laid down in the latter resolution, issued as early as 1977, had followed the recognition of the practical difficulty of indicating precise pronunciations but the feasibility of providing indications of approximate pronunciations adequate for comprehension in the receiver script; in its exact words, the Group of Experts was to consider the nature and design of research and experimentation that might help to establish the ranges of comprehensible pronunciation.

In reaction to the acceptance of the recommendation creating the Working Group, the USA/Canada Division commented that the United States of America expected some difficulty with the subject of pronunciation. The national committee had worked for three years on the matter without success. The China Division also spoke of complications with pronunciation with all languages in China; success would be difficult, but a standardized pronunciation was the objective. The USA/Canada Division commented that age, gender and background of a speaker all influenced pronunciation. In addition, systems for writing pronunciation posed a problem, and non-linguists were unfamiliar with the International Phonetic Alphabet. The East Mediterranean Division (other than Arabic) also commented on the difficulties but felt that work should be started on the problem. The Dutch- and German-speaking Division referred to the pronunciation guide prepared for German national

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<sup>1</sup> Prepared by Tjeerd Tichelaar (Netherlands), Convenor

broadcasters. News readers for one station used the guide and although others did not, standardization was possible. The USA/Canada Division indicated that while not wishing to discourage UNGEGN work on the subject, it seemed impossible to determine pronunciation in the United States of America (GEGN/21 chapter XI, paragraph 42).

### **Document contributions thus far**

Before the institution of the Working Group on Pronunciation, pronunciation-related documents were presented at the Sessions of UNGEGN through the other Working Groups as well as the regional-linguistic Divisions, while the Conferences covered issues relating to pronunciation under the same agenda point as writing systems (transliteration, romanization, writing of names in unwritten languages); hence its strong initial focus on the production of guides for the pronunciation of transliterated names.

Since its inception in 2002, the following papers were presented at Sessions of UNGEGN through the Working Group:

1. The need for pronunciation guides for geographical names - steps towards a solution (WP 1/16 submitted by Israel at the 22<sup>nd</sup> Session of UNGEGN, New York 2004) – following up on a paper presented by Israel at the Eighth Conference (E/CONF.94/CRP.89 and Add.1) which contained the draft resolution for the creation of the Working Group.
2. Pronunciation guide for Hebrew geographical names (WP 2/16 submitted by Israel at the 22<sup>nd</sup> Session of UNGEGN, New York 2004).
3. Problems of characters and pronunciation on Chinese geographical names (WP 22/16 submitted by China at the 22<sup>nd</sup> Session of UNGEGN, New York 2004).
4. A Basic Model for Pronunciation Guides (WP 6/15 submitted by Israel at the 23<sup>rd</sup> Session of UNGEGN, Vienna 2006).
5. The value of pronunciation of geographical names on web sites in Canada (WP 37/15 submitted by Canada at the 23<sup>rd</sup> Session of UNGEGN, Vienna 2006).
6. The Audio Guide to the Pronunciation of Geographical Names in the Placenames Database of Ireland (WP 89/16 submitted by Ireland at the 25<sup>th</sup> Session of UNGEGN, Nairobi 2009).
7. Geographical Name and Jordanian Accent (WP 61/15 submitted in Arabic by Jordan at the 26<sup>th</sup> Session of UNGEGN, Vienna 2011).
8. The Current Research Situation of Variant Pronunciations of Chinese Geographical Names (WP 10/15 submitted by China at the 28<sup>th</sup> Session of UNGEGN, New York 2014).

### **The meeting at the 28th Session of UNGEGN**

The Working Group met on April 30, 2014 at the event of the 28<sup>th</sup> Session of UNGEGN in New York, under the acting chairmanship of Ms Helen Kerfoot (Canada). The starting point of this meeting was the observation that the Working Group needed revitalization and reconsideration/redefinition of its future directions. The former convenor Mr Dónall Mac Giolla Easpaig (Ireland) having retired, the Working Group agreed to transfer the convenorship to Tjeerd Tichelaar (Netherlands).

The Working Group members expressed or reconfirmed their interest in the following theoretical and practical points of attention and potential Work Plan items: (1) pronunciation in multilingual and multi-ethnic contexts; (2) regional differences in pronunciation; (3) pronunciation and transcription/transliteration/romanization; (4) IPA (or a modified form thereof, if IPA is too difficult to comprehend for the general public) and/or audio files/an audio guide for the benefit of the end user; (5) the most suitable collection and distribution methods (6) creation of audio files and integration of them into databases, data files and gazetteers; (7) integration of pronunciation in technical guidelines and technical manuals; (8) languages and IPA tables, the possibility to collect IPA tables in a centralized manner to make them more easily accessible; (9) the possibility to link work of UNGEGN to other disseminated materials (cf. Wikipedia); (10) the availability of audio files for journalists and other interested parties; (11) the possibility to open the UNGEGN database to use by other distributors, thereby increasing the profile of the group of experts; (12) the possibility to set up a Working Group website or a communication/discussion group.

At the next meeting of the Working Group, decisions should be taken on its future directions and the positioning of the various pronunciation-related activities in connection with the cooperation with other Working Groups.

### **Membership**

The current members<sup>i</sup> of the Working Group are: Mr Gilles Bourque (Canada); Mr Chi Sang-Hyun (Republic of Korea); Ms Baboloki Gabalape (Botswana); Ms Rebecca Haddock (United Kingdom); Mr Michel Simeu Kamdem (Cameroon); Ms Helen Kerfoot (Canada); Mr Leif Nilsson (Sweden); Ms Eman Oriebay (Egypt); Ms Sirkka Paikkala (Finland); Ms Lucy Phalaagae (Botswana); Mr Gerhard Rampl (Austria, Coordinator Toponymic Guidelines); Ms Nivo Ratovoarison (Madagascar); Ms Heather Ross (Canada); Ms Sung Hyo Hyun (Republic of Korea); Mr Tjeerd Tichelaar (convenor, Netherlands); Mr Pier-Giorgio Zaccheddu (Germany, Convenor of the WG on Toponymic Data Files and Gazetteers).

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<sup>i</sup> Including those who at the 28<sup>th</sup> Session of UNGEGN expressed interest to join in the discussions of the Working Group