

UNITED NATIONS

Third Session of the Ad Hoc Group of Experts  
on Geographical Names

2 to 12 February 1971

Information Paper No. 11

A Brief Glossary of Terms Employed  
in Geographic Names Standardization

# A Brief Glossary of Terms Employed in Geographic Names Standardization

Carl Page

Geographic Names Division  
Department of Technical Services  
U.S. Army Topographic Command

January 1971

The following are suggested definitions for a number of terms which have been employed in the deliberations of the U.N. Group of Experts on the Standardization of Geographic Names. They proceed from the simple to the more complex; and most of the items which seem on occasion to lack precision are included.

## I. Language.

A. sound - an oral symbol which, in a given linguistic context, conveys a specific item of information.

B. phoneme - a basic irreducible unit of the phonological structure of a language.

A phoneme is a psychological, as well as a phonological, unit. When, for instance, one reasons in silence, he employs the phonemes of a language, rather than sounds of speech or letters of an alphabet. However, in order to effect communication, these phonemes are expressed in terms of oral sound or written symbols.

C. morpheme - a basic irreducible unit of the grammatical structure of a language.

The English word [bookcase] is an example of a word composed of two other words: [book] and [case]. Each of these is a free morpheme, which may stand alone in context. Examples of bound morphemes, which may not stand alone in context, are Spanish [nuev-], [-a], [-o]. [Nuevo] and [nueva] are examples of words, each composed of two bound morphemes. The German word [mein] is an example of a free morpheme, to which may be added the bound morpheme [-e]. Together these form a second German word [meine].

D. syllable - an arbitrary unit composed of one or more phonemes of a language, only one of which may be a vocalic nucleus.

Spanish [a la al tal tral] are all syllables characteristic of the language. In German one might divide the word [sagen] in either of two ways: [sag-en] (employing morphological criteria), or [sa-gen] (employing phonological criteria). In English [θab] (IPA transcription) is a perfectly acceptable syllable, although it does not appear in the lexicon of the language at all.



The items of an alphabetic script typically represent phonemes; those of a syllabic script, syllables; and those of an ideographic script, morphemes.

- J. alphabet - a specific set of graphic symbols which may be employed in representation of the phonological elements of a particular language.
- K. syllabary - a specific set of graphic symbols, each symbol typically (but not necessarily) representing a syllable, which may be employed in representation of the phonological elements of a language.
- L. ideographic lexicon - a set of graphic symbols, each symbol typically (but not necessarily) representing a morpheme, which may be employed in the writing of a language.
- M. writing system (= orthography) - a structure which employs in representation of the phonological and/or morphological elements of a language:
  - 1. an alphabet, syllabary, and/or ideographic lexicon, and
  - 2. a systematic manner of application of the alphabet, syllabary, and/or ideographic lexicon.

A writing system may be relatively simple (as in Spanish), relatively complex (Japanese Kanji), relatively consistent (Hungarian), relatively inconsistent (English).
- N. transcription - the process of recording the phonological and/or morphological elements of a language in terms of a specific writing system; or, an item of a language which has undergone this process.
- O. transliteration - the process of recording the graphic symbols of one writing system in terms of corresponding graphic symbols of a second writing system; or, an item of a language which has undergone this process.
- P. romanization - the process of recording in Roman script either the phonological elements of a language or the graphic symbols of a non-Roman writing system.