Fourth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names
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REPORTS BY DIVISIONS AND GOVERNMENTS ON THE SITUATION IN THEIR REGIONS AND COUNTRIES AND ON THE PROGRESS MADE IN THE STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES SINCE THE THIRD UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON THE STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

Report by Ireland

Paper presented by Ireland

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No representative of Ireland attended the Third Conference in Athens 1977 and no report was presented at that Conference. It is therefore ten years since the last report (vide Second United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, Vol. II, p. 88) and this present report continues from that point.

To begin it may be relevant to quote Guatemala in the volume mentioned (pp. 66 - 67): "It is well known that the Standardization of Geographical names is exceedingly difficult and that it is impossible, in many cases, to achieve any practical results. As an example, it should be sufficient to recall that the writer, at the closing meeting of the First United Nations Conference at Geneva, remarked that, owing to an irony of fate, it had not been possible to decide on one of the many official names of the beautiful Swiss City in whose Palais des Nations we had met, and that the city continued to be known as Genf, Ginevra, Geneve, Geneva and Ginebra". Assuming that this observation of Guatemala's is correct it seems realistic to conclude that variant written forms of geographical names will continue to exist as long as various linguistic groups continue to be in contact.

Exonyms

According to definition 39. in the glossary presented by the Group of Experts on Geographical Names (Vol. II, p. 234, Report of the Third Conference) an exonym is a geographical
name used in a certain language for a geographical entity situated outside the area where that language has official status and differing in its form from the name used in the official language or languages of the area where the geographical entity is situated. This definition seems to be confined to languages having written forms of names and having official status accorded to these written forms. The word official is defined in the glossary as explicitly sanctioned by a legally constituted entity (no. 98, p. 238). At any particular time this definition would apparently not function in the case of a number of languages which might happen to be deprived of official status or to lack a recognised system of writing.

The exonym is thus usually regarded as a feature of international relationships only and as such is regarded in each case as an isolated example in a sea of homogeneity. However, under circumstances, and even under administrations, admitting more than one language, exonyms may multiply up to the point where the term exonym is no longer appropriate because multilingual conditions are commencing to exist. A particular administration, from sympathy, or even from policy, may recognize more than one language and more than one form for names. Also, it is often normal for names to be transparent, that is meaningful, in one language while opaque or nonmeaningful in another language. Such circumstances, which are not rare in the world, have particular relevance to items 5 (National Standardization), 11 Exonyms) and 13 (Writing Systems) on the Provisional Agenda for this Conference. The concept of multiple official versions of placenames might
The United Nations, implies diversity. Furthermore it can hardly be denied that the tendency of independent states to group themselves into blocs voluntarily, for whatever stated purpose, gives rise to situations where standardization cannot be achieved except by a certain degree of coercion.

The official languages

A not unusual situation exists in Ireland, as shown in the report of 1972. The vast majority of geographical names have their origin in the Irish language but until recently only anglicised forms and English-language names had been officially recognised. The Irish solution is to give two languages official recognition. At present the dominant language is English but many people use Irish also, either traditionally or as a language acquired by study. These two languages, English and Irish, are entirely distinct and linguistically are as far removed from each other as French is from German. The Irish language is a member of the Celtic branch of the Indo-European group and has existed in Ireland since prehistoric times, that is, for at least two thousand years. Its earliest documentation consists of inscriptions on stone dating from circa 300 A.D.; its earliest written matter dates from circa 700 A.D. and among its most valued early texts are some from the 8th century which have been preserved for over one thousand years in the city of Sankt Gallen at the opposite extreme of Switzerland from Geneva. In contrast, the English language was first introduced to Ireland circa 1200 A.D. by followers of French-speaking Norman colonisers but did not spread widely among the population until about two hundred years ago.
At the beginning of the 17th century the native Irish institutions and forms of administration were completely suppressed and from then on the native Irish language was entirely ignored as a written language in all forms of government in Ireland. All personal names and placenames were deliberately rendered into an English form so that in many cases the original names were disguised and often unrecognisable.

When the modern independent state of Ireland acquired international recognition in the 20th century the new state adopted a policy of bilingualism. The effective modern status of English was recognized but it was also believed that in order to maintain a definite independent identity in the modern world a deliberate policy would be required which would be consistent with the spiritual and cultural aspects of the philosophy of Independence. It was logical therefore to cultivate the Irish language as part of the distinct Irish identity. For a few decades the problem of identifying and restoring the placenames after so long a period of deprivation was left to individual scholars but eventually it was realised that the task was too great no matter how willing or talented the voluntary workers were. A Commission, An Coimisiún Logainmneacha, was appointed in 1946 to advise the government and subsequently professional staff was provided to do the necessary research.

The proper Irish forms of the names are now determined on the basis of intensive research which covers many disciplines mainly in the fields of language and history over a period of at least a couple of decades and involves the work of many scholars.
on the work and the centre of research is at the Office of the
Ordnance Survey, where a research staff of eight full-time
Placenames Officers is maintained. This staff is recruited
at the level of University research. The Chief Placenames
Officer also acts as secretary to An Coimisiún Logainmneacha.
The work, which might be termed linguistic archaeology, is
constantly producing new information and provides an ancillary
service to many academic activities.

At first the principal task was to study the names of the
main centres of administration and the main physical features.
This was generally achieved by about 1970. In 1973 an Act of
Parliament was passed under which an order has since been made
giving full legal status to the official Irish form of the
names of the post-towns. At present the day-to-day research-
work is directly linked to the publishing schedule of the
Ordnance Survey and since 1950 it is the practice for the
Ordnance Survey to provide the official Irish form for every
important placename, including all administrative placenames,
and to incorporate this along with the official English form
on the new bilingual metric series of Ordnance Survey maps at
scale 1:2500 which is currently being produced. It is intended
to publish in book form with critical analysis the historical
evidence for all administrative and geographical names totalling
over 60,000 — but excluding street-names. At present
systematic research has been completed on administrative areas
comprising 4000 names and these are being edited for publica-
tion. Research is well advanced on areas comprising 7000
names. In relation to Ireland, therefore, until the work
of ascertaining the original names has been completed to a
reasonale degree, the question of international standardization
It may not be necessary to legislate for the Irish names officially published on these maps as the names refer to delimited areas which already bear an official English form. Interestingly there is no record, even from the former administration, of any legislation intended to give official status to the English forms.

The opaque/transparent situation referred to above is very obvious now, as the difference between the English and the proper Irish forms is usually one of orthography. The English forms are generally only ciphers representing names which have obvious meanings in their Irish forms.

Modern names in urban areas have mostly originated in English. Street-names, in particular, may be classed as administrative placenames, although not at national level since they are the responsibility of local government authorities. Their more transient dedicatory nature differs generally from that of the traditional historic placename. It is usual for the local government authorities to supply the Irish form of geographical names of this type.

Policy in bilingual naming

This policy of bilingualism in relation to placenames stimulates awareness of history at various levels. In fact, placenames as such appear to be one of the subjects most fundamentally interesting to people of all kinds. But of course there is a more important side to such a policy. In Ireland it is supported by a determination to re-establish a national identity which was practically submerged and in
pertain to the human heritage in general and are as serious as any similar threats to the natural environment. Endeavours to resist such extinction are surely worthy of genuine support and sympathy. The United Nations Organisation in itself is a monument to such endeavours.

Multilingual policies, undoubtedly, do not aid the practice of standardization. Such policies aim to deal in a moderate way with problems which are often immoderate. In fact a problem may be seen to exist only by those who have a moderate or equitable attitude to a given situation. In many cases the question of standardization of geographical names may be purely routine for one agency while being intimately bound up with the history and aspirations of another. This is a fact which it is unwise to ignore. It will not go away.

Transcription

The question of reproducing names in scripts differing from that of the language of the original name has been treated of in various contributions to these Conferences. Some, in particular, have drawn attention to such unsatisfactory processes as the 'triangular situation', where names in one language are written or even pronounced in another language using a third language as a literal or as a phonetic bridge, despite the distortion which normally results from such an inaccurate and unscientific method.

In the production nationally of world-gazetteers involving a transition from script to script and also of gazetteers giving a recommended pronunciation, the compilers often find it easier to copy exemplars which already exist (although
frequently far from exemplary) rather than seek the correct official phonetic values from the relevant authorities. This is extremely unprofessional and discredits those who practice it. The Ordnance Survey in Dublin will gladly supply accurate phonetic versions for all required placenames in Ireland for both Irish and English forms. This Aspect of gazetteers is one which demands the fullest scientific accuracy and particularly so when the number of names concerned is usually comparatively small.

Standardization

Finally to return to standardization, it is acknowledged that language is one of the basic talents given to man. The recognition of symbols and the interpretation of scripts is a secondary acquisition. The conversion of these symbols into sounds depends on many variables. Perhaps it might be worth investigating the possibility of achieving standardization through the use of numerals or some other device which has already a sufficiently precise international currency. This may hold a solution when it is considered that reading is more and more becoming a function of electronic scanning.