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WRITING SYSTEMS AND GUIDES TO PRONUNCIATION
ROMANIZATION

Review of progress in Romanization

Paper submitted by the United Kingdom

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Paper submitted by the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

Twenty years have passed since the first United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names was held in Geneva. That Conference and the second Conference in London laid the foundations of all that has passed since.

Reviewing the results achieved in terms of the number of resolutions passed over the last two decades progress would appear to be very great indeed. In terms of the number of romanization systems adopted the achievements may seem small.

It would be wrong to measure achievement by the number of systems adopted. The effects of changing from one romanization system to another are very great indeed, affecting names of all kinds and not simply a few geographical names on small-scale maps. Every kind of name is, or ought to be, involved. To obtain agreement is, therefore, in itself a considerable achievement since it commits the country itself to changing names on maps at all scales, on administrative documents, in land registry and revenue documents, in education and finally personal names. Small wonder that some countries have found the conversion to a new system too great to be undertaken. That brings to the fore the question of implementation.

In 1972 the UN approved a system for Arabic, a language used over an area of great geographical extent. Since that time a few Arab nations have implemented the system, the rest have not. That does not imply criticism of those who have not adopted the UN system; it simply underlines the magnitude of the task confronting the Arab world. Great efforts have been made by Professor Tazi in attempting to find a means by which Arabic may be treated uniformly throughout the vast area over which the language is spoken. Yet in spite of his efforts there is still great diversity in the romanized names. One country has devised a special system of its own disregarding the UN system. Topographic maps at all scales have been prepared using that special system.

The situation now existing will not be changed overnight. Most of the Arab world will continue to use their own individual romanizations and the present diversity will persist. The most the rest of the world can do is support the efforts of people like Professor Tazi in their efforts to extend the area over which the UN system is applied.

At the first conference the UN system for Farsi was adopted. Since that time there have been many name changes, most of which cannot be introduced to maps and charts produced outside Iran because of uncertainty over the location of the places for which name changes have been announced. In this case implementation, in a world sense, depends on the availability of information that would allow the positions of places to be defined. Furthermore, without considerable knowledge or full vowel printing of Farsi script correct romanizations cannot be determined.

Conversion to Pinyin of the vast amount of data available on names of China remains a formidable and still daunting task. It absorbs a great deal of time for the experts on geographical names in the UK.

Looking back over the last twenty years the number of names converted by the UK to systems approved by the UN amount to many tens of thousands. Like other nations we still face the task of persuading the people as a whole to adopt the alien spellings we present to them on maps and in atlases. Can we expect the ordinary members of the public to learn the pronunciation of numerous variations in the roman alphabet, some of which are quite unlike any pronunciation they have ever known? How can they be expected to memorize names whose spellings are alien to their own alphabet but, still further, names which they cannot pronounce?

So great have been the changes introduced over the past twenty years that a period of consolidation would seem to be required.

Reference to Arabic, Farsi and Chinese above, has been made simply to illustrate aspects of romanization and its implementation. The number of languages could be extended to cover most of the systems adopted at UN Conferences. There are none free of difficulties in implementation. To their number must be added the consequences of nations which have adopted a new orthography or modified their existing writing system. To all of which there is the increasing use of minority language names.

The whole indicates a future in which keeping abreast of name changes of one kind or another is a colossal task. A period of "consolidation" would appear to be called for. Until the task of implementing the name changes to which we are already committed has been greatly reduced, no further romanization systems should be adopted. The next several years need to be spent in implementing fully the decisions we have taken.