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National standardization: treatment of names in multilingual areas

Geographical names in a nation's culture

Submitted by Poland**

Summary

Geographical names are an important component of the lexicon of every language and every communicating community. Every language and each such community has its own set of proper names, including geographical names. That set is also evidence of the historical development of the nation and its contacts with other nations and languages.

The following groups of geographical names can be distinguished in contemporary languages: (a) those inherited from the ancestral language; (b) those that emerged in the territory of a given language; (c) those borrowed from other languages.

The basic function performed by geographical names is to point to toponymical objects. With the passage of time, some names acquire symbolic significance, e.g. Thermopile, Canossa and Yalta. Other uniting symbols of importance to a specific nation also exist, such as names of centres of government or capital cities and names of large rivers and mountains associated through the centuries with tribal settlements (e.g. Wisła for Poles, the Rhine for Germans). Such symbol-names may be used in various types of advertisements and propaganda since their associations are evident to all.

Geographical names, in all their functions, are not only the wealth possessed by a language but are also the heritage of all mankind.

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** Prepared by Ewa Wolnicz-Pawlowska, Vice-Chairman, Commission for Standardization of Geographical Names Outside Poland, affiliated with the Surveyor-General of Poland, Warsaw.