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Processing of odonyms in Québec, Canada

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PROCESSING OF ODONYMS IN QUÉBEC, CANADA

Progress Report

Although little is known about the activities of the former Quebec Geographical Commission in the area of odonyms, the first names of transportation routes would have been gathered in the 1960s, as confirmed by the 1968 study by Ludger Beauregard on place names in the metropolitan Montréal region, and the *Guide toponymique du Québec*, published the same year by the Geographical Commission. In the latter publication, the Commission indicated that it used road and cadastral maps to gather certain names of public roads or highways with known names. The publication also pointed out that, given the large number of roads open to traffic in Quebec, the public and public authorities could be expected to consider it necessary to name these transportation routes. It also indicated that requests relating to the naming of public roads and bridges were to be forwarded to the responsible departments and agencies for submission to the Commission; the latter would then review and approve them or propose alternatives.

In the early 1970s, the Geographical Commission began to catalogue place names in the field and collected several rural odonyms. Many of these names received official approval at that time.

On August 26, 1977, the Geographical Commission became the Commission de toponymie. Under Quebec's Charter of the French Language, the duties and powers of the Commission de toponymie were much broader than those of the former Geographical Commission. To discharge these duties, and in collaboration with the Office de la langue française, the Commission began to focus on standardizing terminology related to odonyms. Most of the odonymic terms that were studied and approved were published in the *Gazette officielle du Québec* in 1981.

In response to a need for standardization, the Commission undertook an extensive odonymic survey in rural areas of Quebec municipalities. The survey, which began in 1978 and was carried out in collaboration with the Ministère des Transports du Québec, took over four years to complete. Another purpose of the survey was to eliminate confusion in departments dealing with members of the public and with the authorities responsible for the 1,600 municipalities in Quebec, particularly with regard to names used on maps and plans and in addresses. By March 1980, the Commission de toponymie estimated that approximately 7,850 rural odonyms had been collected.

The cataloguing and standardization of odonyms led to official approval of over 11,000 names in the period from April 1981 to March 1982 alone. In a change from previous years, urban odonymy was now a focus, particularly in the case of municipalities that had already been surveyed at the rural level, but that also included urban areas.

It should be remembered that, in terms of odonymy, the Commission de toponymie must share its jurisdiction with the municipalities. Previously written into the *Cities and Towns Act* as well as into the *Municipal Code*, the municipal powers relative to the designation of odonyms are now included in the *Municipal Powers Act* adopted in 2005; the ministère des Affaires municipales et

des Régions is responsible for its enforcement. According to this ministry, the new formulation does not modify the previous situation, and the sharing of jurisdiction between the municipalities and the Commission de toponymie remains the same. The Commission has the authority to officially approve names according to its choice of criteria and spelling rules. Cities and municipalities can give names to streets, roads, and public places and change them. The respective powers of a municipality and the Commission form the application framework within which both agencies must agree when names are standardized and officially approved by the Commission.

After 1982, with the vast majority of rural odonyms catalogued in the field, attention turned to urban areas. Given the inherently different nature of the data, the cataloguing phase consisted primarily in searching through written sources such as monographs to look for names and their origins, maps, municipal plans, lists of odonyms from government partners, etc. These data, however, were systematically verified and completed by a responsible officer of the municipality concerned (e.g., clerk or secretary-treasurer) to eliminate all ambiguities. Field verifications were necessary, however, in certain very specific cases (verification of the road configuration, verification of signage, etc.).

By the end of 1984, close to 20,000 odonyms, out of a total body of names estimated at the time at over 70,000, had been officially approved by the Commission. In the years that followed, activities involving odonyms focussed primarily on concluding negotiations with municipalities that had files that were still open, and on responding to an increasing number of isolated requests.

In 1982, it was anticipated that the operation would be completed within approximately five years; however, the task proved more complex than expected. We had actually underestimated the total number of odonyms in Quebec, and some municipalities were not automatically as cooperative as it was assumed they would be. In 1990, the Commission's official body of odonyms comprised over 44,000 names.

During the next five years, odonyms were officially approved by the Commission de toponymie at the rate of 3,500 per year; however, this was not fast enough to complete the body of Quebec odonyms, which, according to the most recent estimates, exceeds 95,000 names.

In November 1995, work on the treatment of municipal odonyms intensified significantly thanks to a collaborative protocol with the Directeur général des élections, who wished to harmonize the Register of Territories that forms part of the Permanent Electoral List with the Commission's database of place names. With new resource allocations, this operation resulted in 90,700 official odonyms by 1999, the last year of the agreement with the Directeur général des élections. At that time, close to 15,000 names within the 1,300 municipalities of Quebec had still not been officially approved.

The Commission then continued its work of analysing, standardizing, officially approving, and disseminating municipal odonyms, with other types of entities added to the work of the analysts as they dealt with the municipalities (parks, libraries, community centres, etc.). The Commission noted at the time that its revised forecasts had not allowed for the fact that over 500 names are created annually, including those of new transportation routes. And then another event happened

which changed the situation, adding to the number of routes to be named: the introduction of the 911 emergency service. This new service made it necessary to name all unnamed routes, many of which were designated as private and not listed by municipalities.

In 2001, municipalities began amalgamating and new cities were created; in each case, all transportation route names were assembled in a single naming system, which ultimately contained many names that were identical or very similar in spelling or pronunciation. The potential for confusion associated with this situation complicated land management and posed a risk to public security. Harmonization and standardization of the names of transportation routes became essential.

The Commission had always paid particular attention to municipal mergers and was concerned about this situation. It offered its collaboration and expertise to transition committees and municipal authorities, proposing a procedure designed to reduce the number of duplicated road names in amalgamated territories. Several municipalities have since solved their name duplication problems, and other files are in the completion stages. In the course of these harmonization efforts, many new names received official approval, replacing existing names, for which official approval had to be withdrawn.

In 2006, a de-merging process was begun in certain municipalities, once again requiring that specific attention be paid to reorganizing geographical names data.

Today, the Commission continues its analytical work, regularly updating municipal odonym files in continued collaboration with the Directeur général des élections. The computer database, *TOPOS*, now contains 104,265 official odonyms. Although initial estimates assumed that validation of the entire body of Quebec odonyms would be completed in only a few years, municipal toponymy has proven to be a constantly evolving area, among other reasons, because municipalities are continually building new roads and redeveloping urban areas, because municipal territories have been amalgamated in the past and this will happen again in the future, and because there are transportation routes that have yet to be identified. Therefore, the entire body of Quebec odonyms is probably in excess of 108,000 entities and will grow substantially in the coming years. However, of this number, over 1,500 names will not receive official approval because they do not meet the Commission's toponymic standards. Finally, the database of the Commission de toponymie continues to expand thanks to the ever-increasing variety of entities from the municipal realm being provided to the Commission by the cities and municipalities of Quebec.

Finally, wishing to offer its municipal clientele tools that meet their needs, the Commission de toponymie designed a Web site in 1998, and subsequently enhanced it. The site is found at (<http://www.toponymie.gouv.qc.ca/ct/accueil.html>). In addition to a wealth of information on all toponymic questions, the web site contains the Banque de noms de lieux du Québec, the data bank which contains the official geographical names for Quebec's territory, including the names of transportation routes. In 2007, the Commission added a section, still under construction, titled Toponymie municipale (<http://www.toponymie.gouv.qc.ca/ct/thematiques/construction.html>), which is dedicated primarily to issues of municipal interest. It will provide an appropriate service to our clientele who increasingly call upon our expertise. The inventory and analysis work on

odonyms is now complete for the vast majority of municipalities, and the processing of data in a timely fashion allows for constant updating. Recently, a fact sheet was added which will allow municipalities to manage their geographical names in an appropriate manner and in a spirit of cooperation with the Commission de toponymie.

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