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When collecting geographical names, we need to **identify** the language the name belongs to in order to know which phonological, grammatical and syntactic rules apply to it. For example for those countries that do not have any toponymical guidelines we need to know the language in order to apply the correct way of capitalization, hyphenation, spelling, etc.

The quest for the real kinship ties between the languages is indeed an addictive intellectual pursuit, as it allows us to lift a corner of the veil of our own vague past. To the practical toponymist, who pursues clarity about which rules should apply to which names, a difference is a difference: no matter whether it concerns dialects closely related to each other or languages belonging to unrelated families. It is the number of different languages/dialects one has to cope with that counts.

To get a hint what amount of linguistic knowledge is required in order to collect, record and standardize the geographical names within a single country, some statistics of the number of languages involved suffice. If we do not include the smallest independent states and territories, an average Asian country counts more than 60 native languages within its borders, an African country about 50, an American over 40. Even in Europe, where national languages are known to have acquired a dominant position many centuries ago, the average country still counts seven languages. The Summer Institute of Linguistics counts more than 200 different native languages in as many as 11 countries: Papua New Guinea (822), Indonesia (729), Nigeria (513), India (397), Mexico (293), Cameroon (286), Australia (266), Brazil (232), the USA (227), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (219), and China (201). An additional nine countries (the Philippines, Sudan, Malaysia, Tanzania, Chad, Nepal, Myanmar, Vanuatu and Peru) count in between 100 and 200 languages, another 18 between 50 and 100. These numbers do not yet include languages classified by linguists as dialects.

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