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WRITING SYSTEMS

Practical aspects of Geographic Names and Communications**

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PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF GEOGRAPHIC NAMES
AND COMMUNICATION

1. The Role of Names

It is appropriate occasionally to ask ourselves the real purpose of our work in the standardization of geographical names. While the importance of standardizing geographic names can hardly be questioned, we should remind ourselves that geographic names are not an end to themselves but rather are key elements of a field called "communication." It would be utterly impossible to deal with most facets of history, culture, commerce, science, economics, and many other fields (not to mention personal dialogue) without some reference to a geographic name.

As exploration of the world has gradually revealed its geographic features, names have been applied to them, and many nations have created organizations to standardize spellings and applications of local names.

2. National Standardization Programs

These national programs eventually had to deal with names of places in other countries that used different languages and writing systems. While names of some foreign places were developed through "natural" methods whereby travelers would spell the names of places in accordance with what they heard native speakers say, it was evident that more systematic methods were required when dealing with great numbers of places. A variety of conversion systems began to be used on a worldwide basis resulting in a great variety of spellings of names. This situation posed a problem as world

communications began to demand more international uniformity in the spelling of names of countries, cities, and other geographic features. To meet this demand, the proposition was developed that the best writing system for use in bringing about such uniformity was the roman alphabet. The roman alphabet had the inherent advantage of being the most widespread form of writing in the world.

In the meantime, national practices for treating place names on a worldwide basis brought results at varying times in history. In some countries, methods to convert names from non-roman writing systems advanced rapidly, until finally such systems were established for all the major non-roman writing scripts.

3. Communications

In the past two decades, the field of communications has exploded. On the one hand, the print media has increased its readership many times, as more and more peoples of the world demand information from newspapers, books, maps, magazines, and other hard-copy products. On the other hand, the processing of information by means of computer-associated techniques has increased the accessibility of information to users. Now it is possible for "instant" news to be placed on a television screen by dialing a number on the telephone. Whether dealing with a weekly local newspaper of four pages or a highly sophisticated computer-based system of transmitting information visually or even audially on command, the world is experiencing an unprecedented surge of communications that is having tremendous impact on our daily lives. The dimensions of this growth can scarcely be predicted, but its

impact is being felt in large metropolitan centers and in rural hamlets as well.

Concern for assuring maximum communication in regard to geographical names has been expressed through programs sponsored by the United Nations. To achieve standardization, several assumptions have been made and accepted by many participants in UN programs. Perhaps the most logical and practical assumption is that international standardization of names can best be attained when names are spelled in the roman alphabet. Another assumption that has not been universally accepted is that each non-roman-alphabet country has the exclusive right to determine a romanization system whereby its names will be spelled for international purposes. There is another assumption that may require closer evaluation: for each non-roman-alphabet country there should be only a single romanization system.

All of these assumptions should be scrutinized in the light of what is really happening. Furthermore, they should be evaluated in terms of what is theoretical and what is practical. Indeed, "practical" should be the primary objective in the work of the UN as far as names are concerned. For we are doing nothing useful at all if we are not practical. In this connection, one must ask whether our efforts are understood and appreciated by the many countries seeking assistance at very basic levels. At one time, there was some considerable thought given to the goal of standardizing pronunciation of geographic names as a major element of the program for the international standardization of names. But in practical terms, this goal was unworkable.

4. Romanization and Practicality

Now is the time to be practical in the area of romanization. In the first place, it is most assuredly not practical to ask a roman-alphabet country to abandon a romanization system that it has used for decades and to substitute another system. This does not even meet the norms of fairness. It is not practical because of several reasons. An obvious reason is the expense of conversion. In the case of the United States, there is a tremendous investment in a number of reference systems that are based on existing and time-tested romanization systems. To cite one example, the US Library of Congress processes hundreds of thousands of documents each year that carry foreign geographic names. These names become an essential part of the Library's codification system and are carried by reference cards that are disseminated to thousands of libraries throughout the country and in other countries. These library references are viturally inalterable except at enormous expense. There is another reason. Even if conversion were undertaken, there would be dual names in the system for long periods of time until the changeover was completed. Meantime, confusion would reign. The effort to attain international standardization by adopting new romanization systems would surely defeat its own purpose and would create exactly the opposite: disruption of reference and confusion of communication. Yet another problem is that the accepting roman-alphabet country would have to alter its system at the second country's initiative. The example of the Library of Congress can be magnified by each and every United

States official, private, and institutional organization that works with foreign reference materials and documentation. And it can have equal validity in other countries.

There is another practical matter that cannot be overlooked. If the world were to seek a single language that had the widest international usage seven hundred years ago to employ as the basis for standardizing geographical names, Latin would have been the selection. Later, the French language would have been the choice. A search today would find that English has the widest usage. Given this fact, which is incontestable, is it not to a very high degree impractical to reject English as an international language? In those countries of the world where plans and programs to upgrade educational, economic, and other standards are being developed, it is the English language that is the most important basis of communication.

In view of the fact that romanization systems based on the English language have been developed and applied to countless documents that have had worldwide distribution for a considerable number of years, is it not practical to utilize this language?

6. Conclusion

The work of the United Nations in geographical names should be guided by practical principles, by practical assessments of conditions, by the development of practical solutions, and by the goal that practical—not theoretical—solutions are needed.

If non-roman-alphabet nations feel that single romanization systems are essential, there should be no absolute prohibition against it. At the same time, however, neither should there be

any prohibition against the continued utilization of systems that have been effectively implemented and are continuing to work satisfactorily. If the natural consequence of this view—dual systems of romanization—is accepted, then it must be so. Perhaps total standardization always was a theoretical goal. Perhaps we have proceeded as far as possible in the area of romanization. The communication explosion has carried with it not only the English language but also geographical names based on that language. That process has occurred naturally, and it is irreversible.

Given these factors, the most practical device for promoting standardization of names for international purposes is the English language. Recognizing, however, that French and Spanish are also vehicles for standardization and observing that these three roman alphabet languages are official for UN communications, the use of these languages as the basis for international standardization could also be justified.