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### The Category "Minority Language"

#### I. Definition.

Although the treatment of toponyms from "minority languages" has been extensively discussed in meetings of the U.N. Group of Experts on Geographical Names and in the two U.N. Conferences (Geneva 1967 and London 1972), the application of the term has not been clearly delineated. Lack of clarity remains as to which languages in what countries should be included in the term, and as to how toponyms in such languages may best be treated.

Since every language in the world is a minority language (not even Chinese with some 700 million native speakers approaches majority status), a "minority language" must be considered as an item within a country, within a geographical, ethnic, or linguistic region, or within the terms of some other system of categorization. The most useful such system would appear to be by countries.

However, in some countries a definition of "minority language" must include one or more official languages. Little can be accomplished by treating toponyms which derive from such languages as "minority toponyms", the more important matter being their officiality in some given jurisdiction. Indeed, in some circumstances (such as where several or all of the languages of a country are "minority languages") application of the term may be redundant or may give offense.

It is therefore suggested that the number and proportion of users of a particular language in a given place be regarded as matters of secondary importance; the mere existence of a toponym in terms of a given language being the essential item for consideration.

#### II. Treatment.

The employment of nationally standardized toponymy has frequently been cited as a first principle in the standardization of toponymy at the international level. If this is to be regarded as a general guideline, it will be fitting to consider all toponyms which fall within national jurisdictions as being in the first instance within the framework of national standardization. Treatment of toponyms in terms of additional subsidiary categories, such as "minority languages" would thus appear to serve little purpose.

This is by no means to suggest that toponyms which pertain to non-official languages or to languages in use by minority populations in particular countries are not deserving of recognition. On the contrary, recognition and use of such toponyms is universally regarded as both just and beneficial.

The following draft recommendation is therefore set before the GEGN for its consideration:

It is recommended that the term minority language be avoided, and that terms such as official language, unofficial language, principle language, written language, unwritten language be employed as appropriate in its stead.

It is further recommended that toponyms be given recognition in all countries without prejudice by reason of the language of origin, of the number or proportion of users of the language, or of the status of the language in the country.

Carl Page  
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