15 March 2021

English

**United Nations Group of Experts on
Geographical Names
Second session**
New York, 3 to 7 May 2021
Item 13 of the provisional agenda *
Exonyms

Exonyms as part of the cultural heritage

Submitted by Austria **

Summary:

Exonyms, in the sense of place names not used by the local community and differing from the respective endonym (as the place name used and accepted by the local community), are certainly a part of the cultural heritage insofar as they are elements of a language – and it is common sense to regard language as part of the cultural heritage.

However, calling exonyms a part of the cultural heritage can be further justified. They have been created by translation of the endonym, by its morphological or phonetic adaption to the receiver language or by defining a new word – all owing to the intensive relationship of the exonym-using community with the feature indicated by the exonym. A feature frequently referred to in a given community owing to its importance to that community is named by an exonym, given that the exonym – in orthography corresponding to the receiver language – is more easily pronounced and memorized. The pattern of exonyms used by a certain community thus reflects the network of its external political, cultural and economic relations, and a feature referred to by a high number of exonyms is obviously important for many external communities.

A second justification for classifying exonyms as part of the cultural heritage is that they link a community with its history. In historical treatises, places are always referred to by names in the community's own language. They may have been endonyms in older periods and only by change of political or demographic circumstances later have become exonyms, or have always been used as conventional names in a community's historiographic literature.

A third justification is that exonyms play an important role, not only in urban names, such as the specific component of street names, where they actually assume the status of endonyms, but also as specific components of ergonyms, such as names of dishes, pieces of music or plays. Examples are provided in the full report to illustrate those arguments.

---

* GEGN.2/2021/1
** The full report was prepared by Peter JORDAN (Austria), Honorary Chair, Austrian Board on Geographical Names

Exonyms as parts of the cultural heritage

Contents:

1 Introduction

Exonyms in the sense of place names not used by the local community and differing from the respective endonym (as the place name used and accepted by the local community)[1] are certainly parts of the cultural heritage insofar as they are elements of a language – and it is common sense to regard languages parts of the cultural heritage.

But calling exonyms parts of the cultural heritage has also some more justification. They have been created by translation of the endonym, by its morphological or phonetic adaption to the receiver language, sometimes also by defining a new word due to intensive relations of the exonym-using community with the feature designed by the exonym. A feature frequently addressed in a given community due to its importance for the community is named by an exonym, since the exonym – in orthography corresponding to the receiver language – is easier to be pronounced and memorized. The pattern of exonyms used by a certain community thus reflects the network of its external political, cultural and economic relations and a feature addressed by a high number of exonyms is obviously important for many external communities.

Another justification of attributing exonyms the quality of being part of the cultural heritage is that they relate a community with its history. In historical treatises places are always addressed by names in the community's own language – may they have been endonyms in older periods and only by change of political or demographic circumstances in the place designed by them later have turned into exonyms or have always been used as conventional names in a community's historiographic literature.

A last justification may be seen in the fact that exonyms play an important role not only in urban names like as the specific component of street names, where they actually assume the status of endonyms in the toponymic sense, but also as specific components of ergonyms like names of dishes, pieces of music or theatre plays – also there assuming the status of endonyms, but in the wider onomastic sense.

2 Exonyms are elements of a language, a community builder and identity marker

When we understand culture in the most comprehensive sense as a system of norms, by which human communities differ from each other (LÉVI-STRAUSS 1966, p. 86), language is a most

---

[1] These definitions of the exonym and the endonym do not contradict the definitions of the UNGEGN Glossary 2007, they are just more general and all-comprehensive (see JORDAN 2019).

essential part of it (SAPIR 1966). Every language stands for and reflects a system of concepts that characterizes a specific culture and makes a group of people, a community, looking at least slightly different from others at our world, i.e., at complex reality. Thus, people speaking the same language have roughly the same system of concepts, which makes living in a community much easier. And this same system of concepts could develop, because they were able to communicate about it in the same language.

Language has thus very suitable capacities for community building and therefore also as identity marker of group identities (SAPIR 1966, p. 117). Language includes individuals into a community and excludes others at the same time. This capacity is due to several facts (see JORDAN 2020). The first is evident: Language is a system of signs or codes and communication partners need a command of it, should communication succeed. Somebody not skilled in the code system of a community will get a chance to be integrated only if this community is very welcoming, tolerant, polite and educated, e.g., able to speak a trade language or the language of the outsider.

Another factor that makes language including individuals into a community and has a less including effect on others (language is not strictly excluding in this case) and thus a means of community building is closeness. This applies to several language levels and hierarchy levels (scales) of human communities, first and foremost to the lower levels. Closeness can be generated by special words for a concept or by the specific pronunciation or intonation of a given language. Families, partners or parents and children, for example, like to create special words not understandable to others for some concepts and develop in a way a "secret language". There are also subgroups in a wider community or society using specific words and developing a specific language variant such as the younger generation, workers, fans of sport clubs, hunters, fishermen, prostitutes and criminals (see GIRTLER 1996; SAPIR 1966, p. 118). These variations separate an in-group knowing and using these keywords from outsiders. "He speaks like we speak" has the same meaning as "He is one of us" (SAPIR 1966, p. 118). The specific terminology of sciences may also be regarded under this aspect.

Exonyms are elements of a language owing all the characteristics mentioned before. Who uses an exonym, is part of the group acquainted with the set of exonyms specifically used by this (sub-)group. Who addresses a small village beyond the language boundary by the exonym in local use on his/her side of the boundary, identifies himself/herself as an insider and generates a feeling of closeness with his/her conversation partner – like it is, when they speak the same local dialect.

Exonyms are also linguistically most functional elements of a language. In contrast to using the endonyms of another language, exonyms comply to the orthography of the own language and can thus be pronounced without any difficulties; they also allow declension and derivation according to the rules of their own language.

Pronunciation without difficulties is probably not that much of an advantage over endonyms in common trade languages, because at least educated people will pronounce names of these languages correctly. The advantage becomes, however, obvious, when smaller and linguistically distant languages are concerned. But not only with "difficult" foreign languages there is often only the alternative between using a correctly pronounced exonym and the more or less incorrect pronunciation of an endonym. If an attempt is made to pronounce an endonym according to the rules of the language of origin, the flow of speech would have to be interrupted for a pause of reflection and articulation. Switching the human articulation apparatus to the language of origin can, by the way, have an affected and arrogant effect on the conversation partner and thus burden

interpersonal communication. The impression can arise that what matters to the speaker is "to manifest his tolerant, liberal, progressive attitude, his cosmopolitanism, his familiarity with foreign countries and languages." (BACK 1983, p. 64)

Not infrequently, however, we are not even aware of pronouncing the endonym of another language incorrectly. Oscillating pronunciation of foreign endonyms can also become an obstacle to communication. If almost every speaker pronounces the name differently, it can happen that the name can no longer be identified by people listening. This happens particularly with names that have only recently become official or important. Even with speakers on radio and television, in such cases the pronunciation usually oscillates at first until a uniform line prevails.

Further advantages of the exonym derive from the advantage of easier pronunciation: names that are easy to pronounce are easier to remember and thus contribute to a better topographical knowledge. Names that are easy to pronounce, that you are sure of when pronouncing and that you do not need to fear embarrassment when pronouncing, are used more frequently. This promotes the topographical precision of oral communication.

In some languages, declension and the formation of adjectival forms are important. If they can with place names be executed according to the grammar of the own language – as this is the case with exonyms – this can avoid clumsy and sometimes even ridiculous forms.

3 Exonyms reflect the network of a community's external relations

It is supported by several case studies (see JORDAN 2009) that exonyms have been formed and maintained for external geographical features to which a community was and is closely related in economic, cultural and political terms. This results in a frequent use of their names that need for this very reason to be easily and safely pronounced, to be easily memorized. The spatial pattern of exonym use reflects thus the historical and current political, cultural and economic relations of a community. This is another argument for regarding exonyms as parts of the cultural heritage.

It has, however, also to be admitted that there exist linguistic and feature-related factors favouring or disfavouring the creation of exonyms and thus distorting to some extent the pattern resulting from their role described before.

(1) The use of exonyms is favoured, if
    (a) a certain name is difficult to be pronounced by speakers of the receiver language.
    (b) intrinsic requirements of a receiver language's grammar result in deviations from the endonym in writing.
    (c) pronunciation rules of a receiver language require orthographic modification of the endonym to conform to the endophone.
    (d) the endonym is written in a different script. Although pure script conversion is by the UN Glossary not conceived as creating exonyms, it means already some alienation of the endonym, and using an exonym also in the sense of the UN Glossary is only a small step further.
    (e) the endonym is borrowed from another language and just formally adapted to the endonym language. This may provoke the receiver language to create its own deviation from the original.

    (f)   a feature crosses community boundaries and is for this reason designed by several endonyms which the receiver language prefers to replace by a common name for the feature.

(2) The use of exonyms is disfavoured, if

    (a) receiver-language speakers are well-acquainted with a donor language due to its trade language function.

    (b) the donor language has a high prestige.

    (c) the exonym had been borrowed from another language and just formally adapted to the exonym language.

(3) A factor with ambivalent effects is the close linguistic relation between donor and receiver language. This may either prevent the creation of exonyms, because the endonym is easily readable and to be pronounced by the receiver-language speaker. But it may also result in the contrary, because it needs just a diacritic, another character or another article to totally conform to the receiver language, while it does not conform anymore to the UN definition of the endonym then.

4 Exonyms relate a community with its history

There is no question that in the literature of a certain linguistic community historical events, places and people are referred to by those name forms that were valid at the time of the event, at the time referred to or that have long been used for this purpose by the receiver community. Also when we speak in a historical context or represent a specific historical point in time or period on a history map, we will use the names official at that time or customary in our own language for the feature at the time in question. In many cases they are today exonyms due to a change of the endonym.

Carrying them on and using them also in current contexts is frequently impossible or not advisable. It is certainly not possible in the cases of *Vindobona* for Roman Vienna [Wien], *Nova Roma* or *Constantinopolis* for the Roman and East Roman, *Byzantium* or *Byzantion* for the Byzantine Istanbul [İstanbul], where these exonyms refer to exclusively historical concepts and not to the modern concept of these cities – in fact not to the same feature (see WOODMAN 2016). It is also not advisable in cases like Auschwitz [Oświęcim], where according to our modern understanding *Auschwitz* refers to the concentration camp and has thus a specific connotation, while *Oświęcim* refers to the city – both names actually designing different concepts. In cases like *Canton* [Guangzhou] or with most country names and names of historical-cultural landscapes, however, the use of a traditional exonym also in present-day contexts may help to underline the continuity of the place and to emphasize the identity between the historical feature and the current place. The same applies when in modern speech or texts explicit reference is made to a linguistic community's historical or current diaspora situation.

This is not to advocate the dragging on of historical names that are no longer in use today, but only to consider the additional usefulness of exonyms in establishing historical connections and ethnographic references. Exonym use means also in this respect the preserving of cultural heritage.

5 Exonyms are the reference of endonymic name systems

It is a frequent practice to name streets and other traffic areas after external places to which a given community has close relations – be it that the street leads into their direction (e.g., *Triester*

Straße in Vienna [Wien] after Triest [Trieste] in Italy) or for commemorative reasons, e.g., because this external place played an important role for the city naming a street or square after it (e.g., *Avenue de Wagram* in Paris after Deutsch-Wagram, the place of a Napoleonic victory in Austria) or is very important in general (e.g., the former name *Moszkva tér*, a square in Budapest, after Moscow [Moskva] in Russia).

Not only streets, but also buildings like railway stations (e.g., *Gare d'Austerlitz* in Paris after the German exonym for Slavkov u Brna in Czechia), shelter huts in the Austrian Alps (e.g., *Karlsbader Hütte* after the German exonym *Karlsbad* for Karlovy Vary in Czechia), dishes (e.g., *Krakauer*, the name of a sausage after the German exonym for Krakau [Kraków] in Poland), drinks (e.g., *Erlauer Stierblut*, a wine named after *Erlau*, the German exonym for Eger in Hungary) or music groups (e.g., *Egerländer Musikanten* after *Egerland*, a German exonym for a region in Czechia) can be named after external places for commemorative reasons, due to their foundation from there, for marketing purposes or because this is their place of origin. They are, as the examples demonstrate, usually named by the exonyms in common use for these places that assume in this other function the status of endonyms and constitute the germ of a name system in the receiver community. They provide a strong argument for preserving the use of exonyms for these external places not to lose the connection between this external place and the domestic name system. Would the corresponding exonyms get out of use, the meaning of these endonyms would become intransparent.

6 Conclusion

Highlighting exonyms as parts of the cultural heritage means appreciating their value not only as means of domestic (intra-cultural) communication, as favoring the consistent use of one's own language, their importance for the acquisition of cultural techniques (e.g., a geographical view of the world, topographical orientation), for community and identity building, but also their roles in relating various aspects of culture, most specifically in the diachronic perspective. This approach, however, is not to neglect that geographical names in general are politically and culturally sensitive because they constitute identity. Names of a community for external geographical features, i.e., exonyms, are particularly sensitive because they designate "foreign" places and territories and are therefore often associated with claims. This is especially true for historical endonyms, i.e., names that were once the names of a local community that no longer exists there today. Thus, it is always necessary to weigh the pros and cons of using exonyms and to consider their political and cultural sensibility. But it is also obvious (and this paper should have demonstrated this) that in domestic (intra-cultural, intra-community) communication advantages clearly prevail and disadvantages are practically absent. It would therefore be appropriate to complement the so far rather exonym-restrictive UN resolutions in this field by a more differentiated view distinguishing clearly between domestic and international use and acknowledging the benefits of exonyms for domestic communication.

References:

BACK O. (2002³), *Übersetzbare Eigennamen. Eine synchrone Untersuchung von interlingualer Allonymie und Exonymie.* Wien: Praesens.
GIRTLER R. (1996), *Randkulturen: Theorie der Unanständigkeit*. Wien: Böhlau.
JORDAN P. (2009), Exonyms as indicators of trans-national spatial relations. *Review of Historical Geography and Toponomastics*, IV, 7-8, pp. 7-16

JORDAN P. (2019), The endonym/exonym divide from a cultural-geographical perspective. *Language and Society*, 10, pp. 5-21.

JORDAN P. (2020), Languages and Space-Related Identity: The Rise and Fall of Serbo-Croatian. In: BRUNN St.D., KEHREIN R. (eds.), *Handbook of the Changing World Language Map*, pp. 541-561. Cham, Springer Nature Switzerland AG.

LÉVI-STRAUSS C. (1966), Natur und Kultur. In: MÜHLMANN E. & MÜLLER E.W. (eds.), *Kulturanthropologie*, pp. 80-107. Köln, Berlin: Kiepenheuer & Witsch.

SAPIR E. (1966), Die Sprache. In: MÜHLMANN E. & MÜLLER E.W. (eds.), *Kulturanthropologie*, pp. 108-136. Köln, Berlin: Kiepenheuer & Witsch.

SAUSSURE F. de (1967), *Grundlagen der allgemeinen Sprachwissenschaft.* Berlin: De Gruyter.

WOODMAN P. (2016), What is a name change? In: JORDAN P. & WOODMAN P. (eds.), *Place-Name Changes. Proceedings of the Symposion in Rome, 17-18 November 2014* (= Name & Place, 5), pp. 13-18. Hamburg: Verlag Dr. Kovač.

The Group of Experts is requested to:
(1) Discuss exonyms under the aspect of being part of the cultural heritage.
(2) Consider a resolution endorsing this fact and recognizing the benefits of exonyms for domestic communication.