8 February 2023

Original: English

**United Nations Group of Experts on
Geographical Names**
2023 session
New York, 1–5 May 2023
Item 13 of the provisional agenda*
Exonyms

Standardization of common exonyms: reconciling reduction and promotion

Summary**

In many languages, numerous exonyms came into use over time. However, the use of exonyms has become highly contested over the course of the twentieth century. While some stress the importance and value of exonyms as part of linguistic heritage, others point to the negative impact of using names that deviate from the local ones. Using exonyms makes international communication more difficult because language users do not become familiar with the "real", local geographical names, creating confusion and delays in the identification of geographical objects. The use of exonyms can have a negative political connotation when they are not accepted by the local population, or can be regarded as making an implicit political claim or an unpleasant historical reference. In many cases, exonym use is simply inappropriate because the name has become obsolete and is no longer recognized by most language users.

United Nations resolutions from the 1970s and 1980s contain recommendations for Member States to reduce the number of exonyms in their languages. These resolutions also clearly state that precedence should be given to endonyms, if necessary by applying United Nations-approved romanization systems. This has helped to abolish various spelling variants for foreign place names, which could be regarded as exonyms.

In the Dutch language area, discussions similar to those at the international level have taken place among geographical names experts. Some want to promote exonyms even if only a small minority still uses them, while others adhere to the United Nations resolutions and call for a reduction in the number of exonyms. The positions in these discussions do not always reflect language use in practice. Most Dutch language users do use exonyms without hesitation, but only a limited number of exonyms are in common use.

Please recycle

Recently, a complete revision and update of the Dutch exonyms list and website maintained by the Dutch Language Union was completed. Names were checked in various large text corpora against language material representative of the entire Dutch language area. Exonyms that appeared to be in common use were included in the exonyms list, and all other exonyms were regarded as obsolete and grouped as historical names, which are fit for use only in a historical context.

By choosing a middle ground between reduction and promotion of exonyms, the Dutch exonyms list has become more recognizable and useful to Dutch language users. The resulting exonyms list is now strictly based on facts: the proven use of the Dutch exonym in relation to the use of the corresponding endonym in Dutch.

This might also be a solution to the current discussions about the position of exonyms at the international level. It is possible to find a middle ground that reconciles calls in existing United Nations resolutions for a reduction in the number of exonyms and an appreciation of exonyms as part of linguistic heritage. Limiting standardization to common exonyms is useful to language users and does justice to the differing opinions on the subject.

———————————