TOPONYMY AND LOCAL LANGUAGES

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Abstract

Many countries in the world have toponyms in local, regional or minority languages that form parallel namescapes. Despite its recognition of these toponyms and its resolutions to safeguard them, UNGEGN has not provided much guidance on how to deal with them, beyond stating that they must be collected. As the reasons for naming topographical objects form part of our cultural heritage, these should be added to the attribute information collected. But what should happen after their collection is not clear. The impact of national toponymic standardization on toponyms from local languages is discussed, and linked to the fact that we are already used to sets of parallel namescapes from which we choose the appropriate one, depending on circumstances. This paper tries to work out a number of scenarios for dealing with local language toponyms, from which national names authorities should choose one that fits the national requirements.

Key words: toponyms; parallel namescapes; topographical objects; national toponymic standardization*.*

Introduction

We work together in UNGEGN[1] because we want to standardize our geographical names or toponyms, so that they can play their role in the exchange of spatial information and to ease international communication. But the principle behind the international standardization is that we not only standardize our own toponyms, but also accept the toponyms standardized by other countries (taking account of transliteration, where necessary): according to the source- or donor-language principle. Thus, standardization of toponyms simultaneously entails the reduction of the use of exonyms. There are enormous advantages in name standardization . But in order to reap the benefits we should also concede something, and that is our exonym . You can't have your cake and eat it.

In the UNGEGN Strategic Plan, the vision is for every country to have common principles for national standardization of authorized geographical names that identify location and respect the

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[1] Nota do revisor: UNGEGN – Especialistas das Nações Unidas em Nomes Geográficos (United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names).

associated culture and heritage, and to have these names easily accessible for national and international use - facilitating consistent worldwide use of geographical names to foster communication and cooperation. Every country should recognize, respect and promote the value of geographical names as significant elements of its cultural heritage, language and identity, including those of indigenous peoples and regional and minority groups. But at the same time the maintenance and dissemination of standardized geographical names data should be every country's priority.

Themes for this second Pan American International Symposium on Toponymy are, amongst others, Indigenous toponymy and Toponymy of Minority Groups. These are important themes, as many countries have toponyms in local or regional languages. But despite their importance, UNGEGN has not provided much guidance yet on how to deal with them, apart from stating that minority language names (this includes regional or local language names) should be preserved and protected. Resolution I-4D, on multilingual areas, states that in countries in which there exist more than one language, the national authority should determine the geographical names in each of the official languages, and other languages as appropriate. Resolution VII-5 states: "……..Further recommends that, whenever possible, national standardization be based on current local usage of name forms, collected through field work". But these resolutions do not provide clear guidance on whether or how these names from other than official languages should find their way to national gazetteers. This paper will try to identify the ways in which we can both standardize our toponyms and preserve names in regional or local languages.

Let us first look at the influence of language on toponymy

When we want to identify locations or geographical objects in our environment, we use geographical names, so these names have a practical purpose. When more people want to identify the same locations or objects, we must standardize these names, in order to make sure that it is the same object or location they refer to. This standardization is beneficial as it structures both spatial information and space itself; it also helps us to travel from one place to another.

The names we give to topographical objects in our environment would depend on the characteristics of these objects (the relief, soil, vegetation, shape, colour), or would depend on the events (such as a battle, a weekly market, discovery by some person) that happened there or elsewhere, which we want to commemorate: Waterloo for instance is the place in present-day Belgium where Napoleon was finally defeated in 1815, and there are many places in the world (in the US, Canada, Australia, and in London's railway station) called after it. Places can also be called after our state of mind or after something we like or hope for (The Dutch, when they colonized Indonesia, used names like Weltevreden (Dutch name for Jatinegara), or Buitenzorg (the Dutch name for Bogor), which are equivalents of the French name Sans Soucis and mean 'don't worry'. The name Philadelphia means the city of brotherly love. Other examples of such names are Cape of Good Hope or Cape Fear. Shopping malls get fancy names to attract visitors.

Andof course we give these names in our own language, as, at least originally, the meaning of these names was clear to us. Over time, the original meaning may have been lost, it may become opaque, and people then tend to explain these names by folk etymology. The fact that

names are given in a language means that they are subject to the characteristics of that language. When we go from oral to written languages, we are confronted with different writing systems, such as syllabic scripts (like Amharic or Javanese), ideographic scripts (like Chinese) or alphabets (Arabic, Roman, Cyrillic). In order to fine-tune the pronunciation of these letters or syllables , diacritic signs may be added.

The registration of the toponyms would be in a specific form, either definite or indefinite, and in a specific case: in the Estonian, Latin or Russian language, the different case endings of names would indicate whether you are in the city (locative), going to it, or departing from it. The name could consist of one or more words, and these words could be specifics (e.g. Matanzas or Singapore), adjectives (like old or new, upstream or downstream, upper and lower), or they could be generics (as ciudad, rio, monte or isla for city, river, mountain or island). When the name consists of more words, each language would have distinct traditions regarding the use of capitals and hyphens.

Some languages use articles, and thus can have a definite (in Swedish e.g.: Klarelfen) or indefinite (in Swedish e.g.: Klarelf) form, and they can have names in singular or plural or even dual (in Arabic e.g. the word Bahr=sea, Bihar=seas (plural), and the dual form is Bahrain=the two seas, as this island is situated between them). Some names may be regarded as having a male or female or neuter gender, to which adjectives must be matched (Casa Blanca but Rio Blanco, as the word Casa is female and Rio is male).

We must realize that the names given to identify locations or geographical objects were not given at random. The reasons for giving these names, reflect on the language, culture, history, traditions and sensibilities of the communities that coined them. These reasons, or the stories behind these names, we now regard as part of our cultural heritage, and that is something to preserve. The names given provide context to the space we live in, as they link it to our cultural and social history and thus to our heritage.

Just as the linguistic aspects of toponyms, the history behind the names can be stored as attribute information. As the history reflects the original meaning of the name, it can also be used to decide on the correct spelling of the name in a study of the name's etymology (that is the origin of a word and its development throughout history). Other aspects of the attribute information are its location and its juridical status. The last one is not the least: it is those names that are standardized nationally as the official ones that are exported for international use. And as much as we treasure the recent increased attention for the cultural heritage aspects of geographical names, we should be aware that that refers to our endonyms, and not to our names for objects outside the national jurisdiction, that is to exonyms. To promote our exonyms internationally is asking for trouble, as we see again and again within UNGEGN meetings.

What will be the effect of national standardization of toponyms?

The effect of national standardization of geographical names will be that all the nation's inhabitants will know how to refer univocally to spatial objects within their country, how to spell them in the nominative case, pronounce them as correctly as possible and know what kind of objects

they are, how to abbreviate, hyphenate, or use capital letters when writing them, so that they can locate these objects correctly and use their names as links, to which attribute data can be added. So national standardization is good for nation-building, but it does more: through national standardization these names are also made available for the rest of the world's inhabitants to refer to objects in that country.

In every national standardization rule will be developed that will apply nationally. There is the rule e.g. that the first letter in a name is written with a capital, or, for instance in the national language of Indonesia, there is the rule of mandatory writing of generics as separate words preceding the specific, except when it is a false generic, then the name should be written in one word: the river on which Surabaya is situated is called Kali Mas (in two words, Kali means river and Mas means gold, so the name means River of Gold, an equivalent of the Rio de la Plata, the River of Silver) but when this name Kalimas refers to a settlement (Desa Kalimas) or an estate (Perkebunan Kalimas) it is written as one word. The Sundanese prefix ci- means river, but Cisarua and Cipanas, places where UNGEGN toponymy courses have been held, are not rivers, but were called after the rivers (Ci Panas and Ci Sarua, both in two words) they were located on, so again are written as one word. A more famous example of a false generic of course is Rio de Janeiro, a toponym that denotes a city and not a river.

What will be the effect of national standardization on regional/local languages?

In UN Resolution I/4d, on multilingual areas, it was recommended that, in countries in which there exist more than one language, the national authority as appropriate: (a) Determines the geographical names in each of the official languages, and other languages as appropriate; (b) Gives a clear indication of equality or precedence of officially acknowledged names; (c) Publishes these officially acknowledged names in maps and gazetteers.

For a regional or local language to be official, the government must confer legal status to it within a particular area or within the whole country. Usually such legal status also involves that that language can be used in court or in primary education in that area. But, in practice, on official topographic map series and in official gazetteers, it is still rare to find full recognition of local/regional languages.

Because of national standardization, names in local languages may be written

- in a different script or writing system, that may be unable to render all the vowels or consonants in a local language correctly. When the Dutch mapped Java, they could not distinguish in their alphabet between the sounds a/ɔ used in the Javanese language, so they spelled both sounds as a, and consequently the correct pronunciation and original meaning of many toponyms in Javanese was lost. As Indonesia inherited the Roman alphabet from the Dutch, and did not add diacritics, this loss of original pronunciation and meaning became permanent.

- names in local languages might be written without the necessary diacritics or with arbitrary diacritics, so proper pronunciation will be lost.

Or the standardized names may not use diacritics consistently, either regionally or temporally. A century ago, on Dutch top maps of the Indonesian archipelago, for different areas, different diacritics were used to render the same sounds. And over time the use of diacritics to render the same sounds changed as well. So, in order to assess the correct pronunciation, one must be aware both of the location.

- names from local languages may be written with standardized generics, either adding to or replacing local generics. The danger here is that double generics will emerge. In the Indonesian official language, there are the toponyms Pulau Nusakambangan, Pulau Giligenting. Pulau is the official generic for Island, but Nusa and Gili are generics for island too, be it in local languages.

- names from local languages may be written with or without articles, resulting in definite or indefinite forms. Arabic names can be written with or without the article: Riad or ar-Riad, Madinah or al-Madinah. When using the article, it will be difficult to retrieve the names from a gazetteer.

- Or the objects named in local languages may not be recognized or rendered by official topographers: Sami names in Sweden would reflect the traditional livelihoods of the nomadic Sami people, that is: hunting, fishing and reindeer herding. Their toponyms most often describe the landscape or terrain. They would refer to ease of passage (whether it was possible to ford a river or cross mountains), or they refer to relief characteristics and vegetation types. They would have special names for slopes with specific vegetation – that would be functional to decide on their grazing potential for reindeer. But such names would not be collected by topographers nor rendered on official maps.

If we go for protecting regional/local language names, will this lead to a parallel toponymic namescape? Yes, it will. This is unavoidable. We must just find a way in which we both standardize toponyms and keep our cultural toponymic heritage, as expressed in these local language names, intact. This shouldn't be too difficult, as we are already used to many parallel namescapes in toponymy, apart from the two local and official language namescapes: there are the male/female namescapes (in Arnhem land, Australia, the male Aborigines have one set of names and the females another for the same objects), there are the age-governed namescapes (where the younger generations would use other names than the older ones (like Esef or LA instead of San Francisco or Los Angeles), there are the social status-governed namescapes, existing in many Austronesian languages (like Javanese or Balinese), where different toponyms are used for the same objects when speaking to a socially superior or inferior person. And there used to be seasonal namescapes because different nomadic groups, each with their own names, would visit the same area at different times, or because during winter different objects would be visible and named, as compared to summer.

So, if parallel toponymic worlds do exist already, how do we reconcile the protection of local languages with national names standardization? We just have to indicate which namescapes are appropriate in which situation. Different scenarios are possible, and one has to choose a solution amongst them that best fits each specific country. The following scenarios can be discerned (and there may be others still):

A)   Adapt all names to the official language. This is the solution we adopted in the Netherlands up to the 1970s: We have a Frisian minority language in Friesland province, and all Frisian names were translated or adapted by the topographers on the official top maps into the Dutch language. This practice is not acceptable anymore , as it does not take account of the cultural heritage of local communities. People in local communities are taxpayers too and have equal rights in having their names rendered properly.

B)   Have a bilingual map, with both the official and the local names, in which, by its sequence or by its letter type, it is clear which name is the official name and which name is the local/regional name. This solution has now been adopted for topographic maps in the Netherlands, where both Frisian and Dutch names are rendered in the Frisian language area. This is only feasible because it is a relatively small area where double names have to be inserted, where consequently only half the number of topographic objects can be named (because of space constraints). In multilingual areas with more than two languages this solution isn't feasible anymore.

C)   Have double generics (both official and local language ones (like Lake Kuku Nor, or River Mississippi or River Amu Darja). This is cumbersome for foreign people, who will think that the local generics are part of the specific name.

D)   Add generic codes to the names. These generic codes can be abbreviations of the generic in the official languages. As Sungai is the official generic for River in the Indonesian state language, the letter S could be used for this generic code: like Ci Tarum (S) or Ake Lamo (S), or Bengawan Solo (S) where Ake, Ci and Bengawan would be generics for river in regional languages. In French topographic maps, for instance, after river names the codes Fl or Riv (for fleuve or rivière) are added, indicating whether the rivers run into the sea or are tributaries of larger rivers. This coding is less cumbersome and takes less space than having double generics.

E)   In the areas where the local language is spoken, all names are spelled and rendered in the local language. This includes all diacritics necessary for rendering the proper pronunciation of these local names. This presupposes that spelling in the local language has been standardized , and that the areas where local languages are spoken have been demarcated. This solution will necessitate an explanation in the legend how to pronounce the letters with diacritics and also the addition of a list of local generics with their equivalents in the official standard language. So, the map margins will be loaded with explanations and lists of generics, which will be quite cumbersome.

F)   Add IPA (international phonetic alphabet) pronunciation guide to the gazetteer. However, this necessitates learning to pronounce IPA signs, and not many gazetteer users are likely to do so.

G)   Finally, if national standardization rules make it impossible to render local languages properly (for instance because national guidelines prohibit the use of diacritics) on national map series, then one must take care to produce, on a local or regional level, an environment in which these local names are rendered properly. Local language school atlases and wall charts, local language name signs and signposts, local language directories and gazetteers would then be needed. As indicated above, local communities have the same right to have their names portrayed and rendered correctly as other taxpayers.

Finally

This paper aimed at reconciling national standardization with the care for local languages as a cultural heritage. National standardization aims at one set of names as the official one, to be used by and be pronounceable by all the nation's citizens, and which also can play its role in the exchange of spatial information worldwide. Whenever other name sets emerge, reflecting local languages, the use of those name sets must be regulated, in order not to disrupt the primary goal of national standardization. These other name sets can either be merged with the national one, by using one of the scenario's stated above (B-F), or their use can be stimulated or prescribed on a local level (G).

Finally, one must realize, whatever solution is chosen, that standardizing the names in a gazetteer isn't a stand-alone operation: there must be follow-up on the ground as well. Their directories, address books, name signs and signposts must reflect the local names as well. Preservation of the name's heritage won't work if it is only applied to names lists, it must also be visible in reality (see Figure 1).

Thank you for your attention!

Figure 1. Name shield for roads in Bandung, Indonesia, with name in Roman alphabet and in the local script Aksara Sunda (photo Tjeerd Tichelaar), with a clear indication of priority.

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