SOME PRINCIPAL THOUGHTS ON PLACE NAMES AND PLACE NAMING

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Abstract

The article addresses in the manner of an opening speech basics of toponomastics like the symbolic and identity-shaping power of place names, the place-naming process with its implications not the least on the endonym/exonym divide, as well as major roles of place names in mediating between humans and geographical space. It adds some remarks on place-name standardization as it is exerted on the global level by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) as well as by national and subnational authorities in various countries emphasizing on the one hand its benefits, but hinting also at the delicate relationship between place-name standardization and conceiving all place names as cultural heritage as well as on the fact that place-name standardization is not politically innocent.

Keywords: symbolic power of place names; place-naming process; roles of place names in mediating between humans and geographical space; place-name standardization.

1. INTRODUCTION

Name giving in general expresses responsibility. When Genesis 2.20 says: "The man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field" (Figure 1), this exactly is addressed: The animals are entrusted to man. The person responsible or owning something has the right of naming. It is like that, when parents name their children, although ownership would be the wrong word in this context. It is rather responsibility or entrustment in this case. This understanding of naming and names is certainly common to all cultures based on the Jewish-Christian fundament. I don't have the expertise to judge, whether this understanding is universal. But I don't know any culture, which would not understand it in this way.

Having started with this basic statement on naming and names in general, I would like to proceed specifically with place names and address the following items:

- the place-naming process
- the roles of place names in mediating humans and geographical space
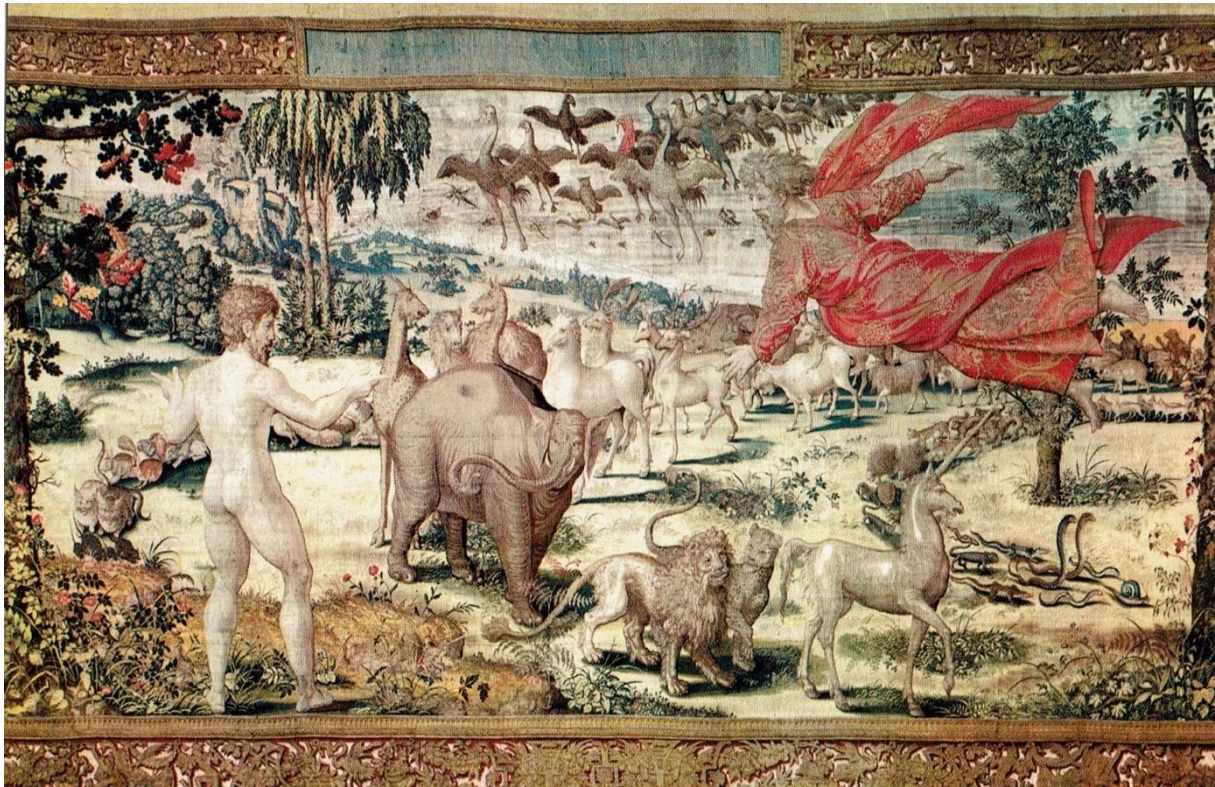- Some reflections on place-name standardization.

Figure 1. "The man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field,…" (Genesis 2:20). Source: Flemish tapestry, Galleria dell'Academia, Florence.

2. THE PLACE-NAMING PROCESS

Three factors are involved into the naming process (see also JORDAN 2012, 2019a) (Figure 2): (1) The local community in the sense of a group of people, who feel to have a common identity. It can vary in size between family/partnership, nation, group of citizens, language community up to the global community ("global citizens"). It needs not to be a cohesion group in the sense of a group of people tied by personal relations and almost in permanent interaction. It can also just be an identity group, i.e., a group of people feeling to have a common identity. They don't need to have personal relations. They don't even need to know each other. So, also a nation is a community in this sense and included here. (2) The community's culture including language. Culture is understood here in the most comprehensive sense as the totality of all human expressions (see LEVI-STRAUSS 1946; KROEBER & KLUCKHOHN 1963). (3) Geographical space subdivided into geographical features; geographical space understood as the totality of all relations between material and immaterial features. The only actor in this process is the (local) community. It inhabits a certain section of geographical space, has developed a certain culture, perhaps also a language of its own, and structures complex geographical space mentally into features on the background of its culture and led by its specific (e.g., economic) interests marking these features by place names.

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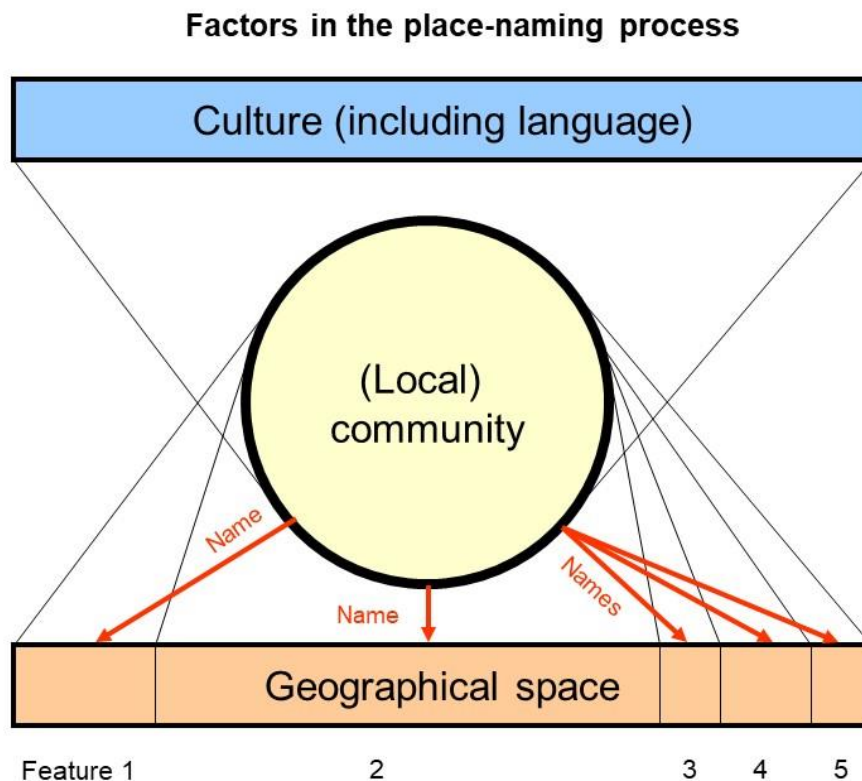
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Factors in the place-naming process

Figure 2. Factors in the place-naming process. Author's own draft.

Names for geographical features at the community's own territory may be called endonyms ("names from within"). Endonyms in this sociological sense are symbols for appropriation or responsibility in the sense mentioned before. For geographical features offside its territory a community usually just adopts already existing names, translates them into its own language or adapts them morphologically or phonetically. In contrast to names for features on its own territory (= endonyms) these are exonyms, needed by a community to mark features offside its own territory sufficiently important to it in a comfortable way (easy to be pronounced, to be communicated). In contrast to endonyms exonyms are not symbols for appropriation or only responsibility and do not express claims but indicate the importance of a feature for this community and the relations it has with it (see JORDAN 2015b, 2019b). Exonyms just help to integrate this foreign feature into the cultural sphere of a community and help to avoid exclusion and alienation (BACK 2002). But it is also true that the use of exonyms is sometimes conceived as expressing claims, especially when exonyms correspond to historical endonyms. But this is a misunderstanding which should be erased, also by a politically sensitive use of exonyms (see JORDAN 2000).

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Naming is done either by convention between the members of the community or by an institution charged and legitimized by the community for this purpose. Of course, also an individual can attribute a name to a feature, but such a name will not get into use, assume communicative value and persist, if it is not accepted by the community. So, it is at the end always the community, who acts in this process.

No community, however, is completely homogenous. It is always composed of a dominant portion and non-dominant subgroups. The dominant portion of a community is of course in the position to decree the use of a name, to oblige other community members to use a name whether they like it or not.

It is also a fact that we usually do not belong to only one community, but rather to a multitude of them – we have in fact multiple group identities. These various communities have usually also different relations to space, feel responsible for different sections of spatial reality.

We are global citizens when we engage ourselves for questions like climate change, global disparities in development etc. Global institutions und organizations support this community (e.g., United Nations). We are inhabitants of our continent as far as we feel responsible and engage ourselves for this continent. We are citizens of an association of countries like the European Union, members of a language community (e.g., the Portuguese), members of a nation, citizens of a country, inhabitants of a region, a city, a commune, a village. Almost all these communities are in a way organized and feel a responsibility for a section of space. All of these mentioned have certainly a specific relation to space (Figure 3). But there may also be communities with the same relation to space and different just by cultural characteristics (ethnicity, language, religion etc.) like it is in minority situations, when a given territory is settled not only by one, but by several communities.
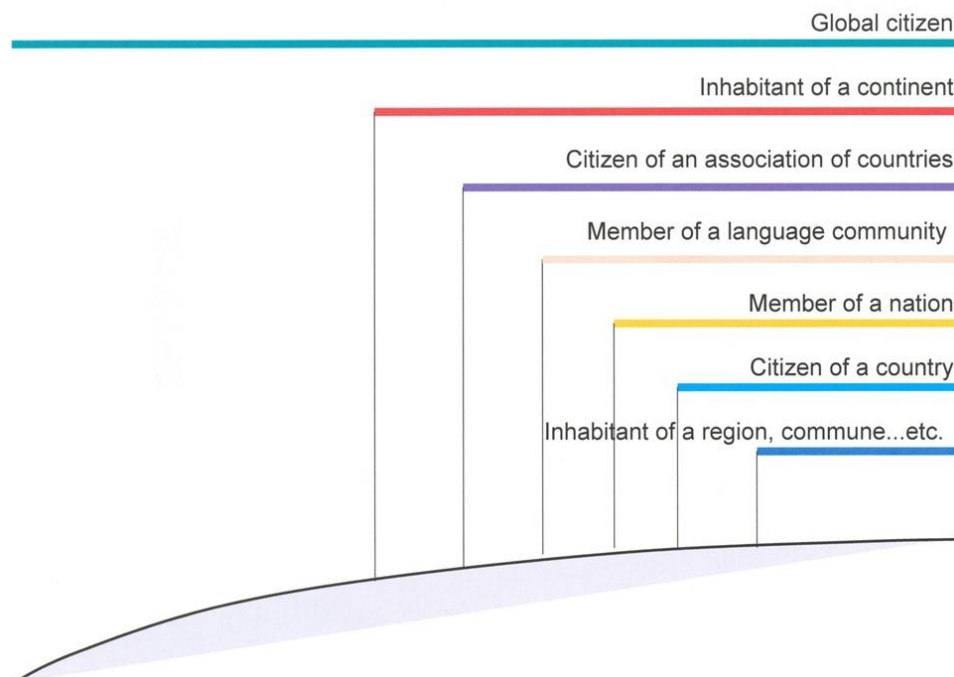

Figure 3. Multiple space-related identities. Author's own draft.

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All these communities are also active in naming. But they can attribute endonyms (= names from within) only to geographical features at their very own level (scale) since the competence for attributing a name (for applying the endonym) is regulated by the principle of subsidiarity. It is always the smaller community, the community closer to the feature and actually responsible for it, who has the primary right to attribute a name. Thus, the name for the Earth is certainly an endonym in all languages spoken on Earth. Names for individual features on Earth are, however, not anymore endonyms in all languages – even if we all feel to be global citizens. Thus, the name for a certain country is certainly an endonym in the language of all communities forming the permanent population of it, while not all the names in the language of non-dominant communities for the capital of this country will be endonyms, because not all of them will be well-established in this capital. This principle of subsidiarity is also valid within a certain language (so, not only when communities with different languages are involved). It occurs frequently that a local population calls a village differently from outsiders (speaking the same language).

Based on this concept, I would define the endonym as the name accepted and used by the local community and the exonym as the name not used by the local community (see Jordan 2021a). Thus, the endonym/exonym divide corresponds exactly to the divide between "space" and "place" in the sense of Yi-Fu Tuan (Tuan 1997, 1990, 1991), i.e., the divide between (neutral) space and this section of space, to which a certain human community has assumed relations ("place"). It also corresponds to the basic human attitude of discerning between "mine" and "yours", between "ours" and "theirs" and to the other basic human attitude of territoriality – the desire to own a place – which exists at all levels of human community building. It is transferable to other name categories like ethnonyms, names of institutions etc., i.e., to all where an inside as well as an external view is relevant. It is this a basic onomastic concept.

3. ROLES OF PLACE NAMES IN MEDIATING HUMANS AND GEOGRAPHICAL SPACE

Let me proceed now to the roles or functions of place names in relating humans and geographical space (see Jordan 2012, 2019a, 2019b). Place names (can) have four main functions in relating humans to geographical space.

3.1. Place names often reflect characteristics of space important for a certain community

They often describe location, morphology, waters, vegetation, soils of a certain place; or functions of a place within geographical space: bridge function, port function, pass function. They highlight in this way characteristics that seemed important to the people, who named the place on the background of their culture and their specific interests. Farmers had naming motives different from herdsmen, seafarers different from mountain dwellers. We, the people living today, have naming motives different from our ancestors. For us the meaning can have lost its transparency,

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e.g., when the name originates from a language spoken earlier and not anymore at a place. The meaning attributed to the feature and expressed may have lost its importance for us, since our culture and interests are different from when the feature was named. But it can be assumed that no name was meaningless for the people, who were the first to apply it. Thus, place names reflect the perception of space by a certain community. They are "condensed narratives" into two directions: about the feature named as well as about the cultural disposition of the name-giving community (see JORDAN 2021b).

3.2. Place names mark the territory of a community

Place names are (among other symbols) markers of the group's own territory (Figure 4). It is not to enlarge on this role here, since it was discussed already in the context of the naming process.

Figure 4. Signpost at the provincial boundary of Styria [Steiermark], Austria. Photo: Jordan, 2008.

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3.3. Place names structure space mentally

They help to subdivide complex spatial reality into features. Every geographical feature (in the sense of a subunit of geographical space) is a mental construct. This is especially obvious with landscapes, cultural regions or macro-regions lacking concrete or clear limits like current administrative boundaries, "natural boundaries" like mountain ranges or rivers.

A subdivision of Europe into cultural macroregions is obviously just a convention (Figure 5). It is impossible to find clear boundaries of Central or South Europe in reality. A place name is the vehicle, the instrument in this process of mental structuring of space. Without place names we would not be able to establish a system of space-related identities, to communicate it, to maintain it (HELLELAND 2009). In many cases (e.g., cultural regions, landscapes) the place name is in fact the only identifier of a geographical feature. And a section of space without a name is obviously not conceived as a feature in its own right – just as part of another feature.

Figure 5. Subdivision of Europe into macroregions according to cultural-geographical criteria (= Recommendation of the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names, StAGN). Source: JORDAN (2005).

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3.4. Place names support emotional ties between humans and place and promote in this way space-related identity building

If somebody acquainted to a place reads, mentions or memorizes a place name, this recalls all the contents of a space-related concept with him/her, reminds her/him of sights, persons, events, smells, sounds associated with this place and lets "the feel of a place" arise as Yi-Fu Tuan calls it (TUAN 1977, 1990, 1991).

Therefore, it is, e.g., important to render minority place names on signposts (see HELLELAND 2009; JORDAN 2004, 2014; ORMELING 1983; REITERER 2003; WATT 2009). They give these communities the feeling of belonging, of being at home there. It is also a kind of an affirmative action, since non-dominant groups are in special need of being affirmed. For them group identity (including space-related identity as a prominent part of it) means a daily challenge – much more than for a dominant group. The main task of minority place names on signposts is not information (assuming that somebody could not be able to read the name in the dominant language) but symbolic representation of the minority. The minority is to be affirmed that this is also its place; the minority has a share in its identity. Therefore, it is also important that on the signpost figures (Figure 6) the endonym as it is used and written by the minority group: the Ukrainian name in Cyrillic letters in this Romanian case (Figure 7).

Figure 6. Bilingual (Italian/Slovenian) town sign in Italy. Photo: JORDAN, 2006.

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Figure 7. Bilingual and biscriptual (Romanian/Ukrainian) town sign in Romania. Photo: JORDAN, 2008.

How important place names are for identity and emotional ties, can be also seen from emigrants (to overseas), who frequently take the name of their home place with them, as a last tie to their former home; or to make the new place more familiar (Figure 8). *Nijew Amsterdam, New York* are prominent examples. But also, Breslau in Ontario, Italian names in Latin America (Figure 9) (see PALAGIANO & CAPUZZO 2021).

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Figure 8. Town sign near Kitchener, Ontario, Canada. Photo: Jordan, 2008.

Figure 9 - Names after Italian places in Latin America. Source: Palagiano & Capuzzo (2021).

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4. STANDARDIZATION

Finally, some reflections on place-name standardization as it is conducted by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) at the global level and by national and subnational place-name authorities on the country level (see KERFOOT 2003). Standardization of place names means defining out of a variety of names for a certain feature the most relevant ('correct') one and to promote its use, in the first line in the public sphere. The guiding principle is "one name for one feature", although this principle is not valid in the case of minority and indigenous names and (with a certain caveat) also with exonyms. This is done to achieve the following goals: to achieve unambiguity, which can be essential for the identification of a location, most important in emergency situations; to achieve – more generally speaking – clarity and reliability, as it is useful also in other fields, when procedures are based on rules and scientific findings; to preserve and protect traditional names against unfounded changes and commercialization; conflict prevention. Place names, due to their symbolic power, frequently cause conflict (see ELLER, HACKL ĽUPTÁK 2008; HORN 2004). If their use is regulated and if an international authority like UNGEGN offers recommendations this can contribute to avoid conflict (see UNGEGN 2022).

Standardization does not mean that all other names should fall into oblivion. They, too, should be preserved and documented. With our electronic means this is easier than ever today. In any case, place names are a cultural asset – whether standardized or not. Each name can also be valuable for research. However, standardization <u>does</u> mean a restriction in the practical use of names.

From the goals of standardization and the efforts for these goals at all administrative levels, it can be concluded that standardization creates indeed a lot of benefits. But it is also justified to ask who benefits most from standardization or who should benefit from it? Is it the local and regional community with their frequent use of dialect names (= names in the vernacular language)? Is it the nation, the community mostly linked by a well-codified standard language and its names? Or is it the international community, whose communication is to be facilitated through standardization, then perhaps in an optimal way by the use of "international names", in practice the exonyms of a global trade language? The basic principle of standardization, the agreement on a single 'correct' name for a geographical feature, actually requires a decision between these options, because it cannot meet all these requirements at the same time.

This question, however, is not just about the spatial reference, about the scale. There are also people with different interests <u>within</u> these spatial categories, e.g., those who primarily value clear communication, and those who are more concerned about the preservation of place names as part of the cultural heritage (see JORDAN, BERGMANN, CHEETHAM & HAUSNER 2009). So, the problem is more complex than it appears at first glance. These are also questions typical for critical toponomastics, a rather recent research current that examines the social and political background of place names regarding also standardization as an expression of a specific naming policy and not without alternatives.

In the context of the UN, Ingvil NORDLAND explicitly referred to this problem for the first time in 2019 (see NORDLAND 2019). In practice – as always with place names – it is the dominant social

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force and the dominant political level in a hierarchical political system that determines the direction. Today, these are usually the nations dominating also international bodies like the United Nations. Where the national level is exceptionally weak in relation to other political levels, like in Switzerland, the national interest is less able to assert itself also with place names. This political constellation means that, as a rule, place names are standardized in their respective standard language form, which means optimizing them for nation-wide communication. Occasionally, however, also dialect names are standardized if they are well-established in literature and public use and well-known also in other parts of the same country. Usually, however, this is not the case, also because sometimes dialect speakers consider a written dialect name to be unsuitable for the public sphere and would probably even feel ashamed by seeing their (intimate) dialect names, e.g., on town signs. It is also a fact that the ability to read dialect in its written form (in its specific orthography) is not widespread.

Declaring the names of a global trade language the norm instead of names in a national standard language is not a realistic option either as long as nations are the most powerful global players and languages and alphabets with their place names are so symbolic for national identity. Even if English proceeds in its status as the dominant trade language, that does not have to mean that English names, if they exist for a feature, will become the standard. Just as English as a trade language with the specific functions of this language category will continue to supplement local standard languages in their own functions and each of these two categories would have its dominant functional area, so would it be with place names in these languages. In their additional function as international names, English exonyms will only become standardized for certain international purposes (navigation, aviation).

What cannot be denied is that standardization means elevating one name version for a feature over the (usually many) others and promoting its use, while other versions are regarded as less useful and in danger to fall into oblivion. It is like elevating in a multilingual society only one language to the rank of an official language. This means that standardization works against the wealth of culture expressing itself also in the wealth of place names, which is a fact that has also in UNGEGN fully been recognized only more recently, and results is a tension that remains at least to be mitigated.

5. CONCLUSION

In accordance with the requirements of an opening speech to be general and principal, the article hints at some basic attributes of place names such as their expressing responsibility or ownership, their symbolic and identity-shaping power in general as well as their roles in mediating between humans and geographical space. In addition, it highlights the benefits of place-name standardization, but does also not conceal that place-name standardization goes to the expense of cultural variety, of the wealth of place names as a cultural heritage. It also emphasizes that place-name standardization is a political decision between alternatives, thus depending on the political and societal environment.

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