

**Twenty-third Session  
Vienna, 28 March – 4 April 2006**

---

**Item 14 of the Provisional Agenda:  
Activities relating to the Working Group on Exonyms**

**Problems with Standardization of Exonyms in Poland**

## Problems with standardization of exonyms in Poland

Standardizing Polish exonyms is the work of the Commission for Standardization of Geographical Names Outside Poland affiliated to the Surveyor General of Poland, established in 1973. The defining of correct forms of Polish exonyms, that is changing already existing names, adding new ones or eliminating superfluous names falls within the competence of the Commission. In the mid-1990s the Commission issued four brochures with Polish exonyms comprising around 6500 names.

In the past few years the Commission has been working on elaborating a list of names of the world's principal geographical features comprising around 50,000 names, including Polish exonyms. Work on the list became the opportunity to submit the exonyms recommended by the Commission to fundamental verification. The results of these efforts have already given rise to problems connected with the use of the definition of an exonym.

The commission applies the definition of an exonym in the wording accepted in the *Glossary of Terms for the Standardization of Geographical Names* of 2002: "Exonym is a name used in a specific language for a geographical feature outside the region where that language enjoys official status and differs in form from the name used in the official language or languages for the region where the given geographical feature is situated".

However, exonyms defined in such manner do not include a certain group of geographical names traditionally used in Poland. That is why the Commission uses the term "Polish geographical names" in its work, in a wider comprehension than exonym. "Polish geographical names", comprises three groups of names, apart from the exonyms defined by UNGEGN:

The first constitutes geographical names universally used in Poland for trans-border objects, coinciding with at least one standardised endonym used in one of the countries through which the given feature runs, but simultaneously differing from at least one of these endonyms. For instance, in Poland the name *Kura* is used for the whole of the river, i.e. the name identical with the formal Turkish name (*Kura*), while the same river მტკვარი: *d* – – *Mtqvari* in Georgia and *Kür* in Azerbaijan. The same is true for the straits separating France from Britain which is known in Poland exclusively by the French endonym *La Manche*, the English name *English Channel* never being used. The same is true of Central Europe's longest river where the Polish name (*Dunaj*) is identical with the Slovak endonym and the transliteration of the Ukrainian name ????? – *Dunaj*. The thing is that the name *Dunaj* is treated as a Polish name and used for the river along its entire length, i.e. apart from Slovakia and Ukraine, also in Germany and Austria (German endonym: *Dunau*), Hungary (Hungarian endonym: *Duna*), Croatia (Croatian endonym: *Dunav*), Serbia and Montenegro (Serbian endonym: ????? – *Dunav*), Bulgaria (Bulgarian endonym: ????? – *Dunav*) and Rumania (Romanian endonym: *Dun◆rea*).

The second group of names constitutes geographical names universally used in Poland for a feature possessing several endonyms in the official language or languages in a given country and identical with one of the names of the feature. For instance the capital of Ireland is exclusively called *Dublin* in Poland, that is using one of the two formal names (English endonym), while the Irish endonym *Baile Átha Cliath* is never used. The same goes for the Albanian capital which is exclusively known in Poland as *Tirana* through two Albanian endonyms exist for that city: *Tirana and Tiran ë*.

The third group comprises geographical names in general use in Poland for features whose formal endonyms are written in a non-Roman alphabet, identical with the name of the given feature written with the use of one of the Romanization methods. The Chinese capital is

called *Pekin* in Polish but that is not an exonym since it is a transcribed form of the Chinese name 北京. For many years Chinese names are not used in Poland in Polish transcription, the only form used being in the simplified pinyin system (*Beijing*) or in the pinyin system with tonal marks (*Beijing*), though the Polish transcription system of the Chinese alphabet still exists, which means that names coincidental with its rules cannot be treated as exonyms. The same is true of the name of lake *Bajkal* (Russian endonym *??a?*). In this case the Polish name is identical with the Polish transcription of the Russian name for the lake. But the name is so widely used that it is treated as a Polish exonym – for example, on maps in general geographical atlases it is given in brackets in the form used in the transliteration. Another example is the name of the *Ural* mountains (Russian endonym *??a?*) – the Polish traditional form being identical with the spelling in the formal Russian transliteration GOST-83 (in the Polish transcription this name takes the form *Ural*). However, that name functions in Poland as an exonym – e.g. in school atlases for countries using non-Roman spelling systems, geographical names are given in the Polish transcription, but in such atlases it is never used in transcription form *Ural* but in the form *Ural*.

The Commission for Standardization of Geographical Names Outside Poland, treats these three forms of names which are not exonyms in the formal sense, as quasi-exonyms – and as such are mentioned in lists of Polish exonyms. The Commission established their correct forms, are recommended for use in publications destined for the Polish market, in particular for publications destined for schools.

The conclusion would seem that a name and definition of that kind of names, which are formally not exonyms though they act as such, should be proposed. “Quasi-exonym” does not seem appropriate but perhaps “traditional name” might be a proper term. The *Glossary of Terms for the Standardization of Geographical Names* of 2002 defines that term as an “exonym in relatively widespread use by a particular linguistic community and usually found in its tradition and literature” but in reality every exonym satisfies that definition, which means the *Glossary of Terms* .... treats “traditional name” as a synonym of the term “exonym”. This leads to the conclusion that “traditional name” is a term insufficiently used and can be proposed to encompass both exonyms and the three above-named kinds of names.

Another problem (beyond that of quasi-exonyms) which appears in the work of the Commission for Standardization of Geographical names Outside Poland when standardizing geographical names is that of a formal statement whether a given name is an exonym or not. The present definition says an exonym is a name different from endonyms in official languages. The issue of stating what an endonym is in a formal language constitutes a great problem. The first thing being to state what languages in a given area have a formal status, which results from various definitions used in various countries for various languages: constitutional, state, official, national etc. For instance, in Poland the Act of 2005 on national and ethnic minorities says that languages used by such minorities are minority and regional languages, and are not official but auxiliary (additional) languages. However, geographical names in these languages is to be defined – which means: will names in the Kashub language in north Poland be endonyms in an official language as required by the definition of “exonym” or not. Many more such examples can be quoted. In addition, in many countries it is difficult if not impossible to find information whether additional official languages apart from the national language, appear in a given area or not. (e.g. is Yiddish an official language in the Jewish Autonomous Region in Russia, or not; does the Hawaiian language have formal status in Hawaii; is the Norfolk language used apart from English on Norfolk Island also an official language; which are the official languages in the Northern Mariana Islands, Palau and Micronesia, with different sources giving contradictory data here).

A further problem is that of areas without an official language – seas and oceans and submarine forms outside territorial waters, and also the Antarctic. Can names in English be accepted as endonyms in such cases? A further headache is caused by defining whether the territory of an official language spreads onto seas to the extent of the width of territorial waters or to the width only of the economic zone – that is 200 nautical miles? Is it admissible to assume that all the names used for an area which has no official language are exonyms? Perhaps the opposite is true – since no official language exists, there can be no talk of exonyms. A similar problem exists when a certain feature has no name in the country where it is located, but the name of such a feature is used in another country. (e.g. *Wyzyna Zachodnioaustralijska* the Polish name used for the extensive uplands of west Australia which have no single collective name in Australia but only several relating to smaller areas).

Yet another vague issue concerning official languages is the existence of quasi-states (states-like entities), that is those not recognised internationally. Can the languages introduced by such “states’ authorities” as official languages be recognised as such or not? – several Polish exonyms from the territory of Moldova are identical with the transliteration of the Russian names of these features (e.g. the Polish exonym of the name of the river *Dniestr* is identical with the transliteration of the Russian *Днестр*) while Russian has been introduced as the “official” language by that country’s separatist authorities. The present definition of an exonym does not elucidate that problem.

A further problem related to the present definition of exonym in setting names in official languages. Are these to be all the forms of the name of a given feature in this official language – even colloquial, slang and acronym forms? Do any other ways exist of gaining access to such forms of names and how can it be stated whether a name recognised as an exonym is really an exonym (i.e. differs from all forms of the name in the official language?) Most gazetteers limit themselves to one official form of a name, omitting unofficial variants, which means they cannot be used to settle all names of a given feature in the official language. That leads to the fundamental problem which is - the definition of an exonym in its present form in practice eliminates the possibility of qualifying names as exonyms. That is why, when setting Polish exonyms, the Commission for Standardisation of Geographical Names Outside Poland, invokes the officially standardised endonyms of a given feature and not the endonyms in the official languages of the area on which the given feature is located. It does so being guided by utilitarian reasons since otherwise no list of exonyms could ever be elaborated.

The substantial number of problems stemming from the use, in practice, of the present definition of an exonym is inclining the Commission for Standardisation of Geographical Names Outside Poland to propose that UNGEGN Experts redefine the term “exonym”. The new definition of the term “exonym” should be simple, unambiguous and, above all, applicable in practice when elaborating national list of exonyms, e.g. – exonym name used in a specific country, in its official language, for a geographical feature situated outside this country, and differing in its form from the standardized endonym for this feature.