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National standardization: treatment of names in multilingual areas

Geographical names in a nation's culture

Submitted by Poland**

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** Prepared by Ewa Wolnicz-Pawlowska, Vice-Chairman, Commission for Standardization of Geographical Names Outside Poland, affiliated with the Surveyor-General of Poland, Warsaw.

Geographical names are an important component of any language's lexicon. Some are common expressions which define various topographical objects, e.g. *mountain, river*. Together they create topographic terminology. That apart, a large number of proper nouns also exist highlighting specific single objects singled out in the language principle, i.e. by nomination.

It seems that common names were used for topographic objects in the first primitive communicative groups. As time passed some names lost their meaning and became onimasticised, that is they passed from the group of common names to that of proper names. A study of the names of Europe's large rivers reveals their appellative roots.

Prehistoric migrations and language changes have obliterated previous meanings and most names today are bereft of any real meaning.

Dialectical research suggests how topographic names could function in forming communicative communities. In rural districts, when one asks what river flows nearby the answer often is "the river, you know". Not only in the countryside but also in private life people say "Let's go to the river" and not a specific river, "Let's go for a swim in the sea" and not in the Baltic, "I was in town" and not in a specific town. The context of what is expressed usually suffices to avoid using proper nouns. But as society and the economy grew so did the need to give precise identification not only of people but also of geographical objects. Three groups of geographical names usually appear in contemporary languages, which refer to objects within a given language area:

(a) inherited from the ancestor-language (usually a set of terminological expressions and names of place, rivers, lakes, mountains etc. derived from them). Some expressions have already become unintelligible to today's population since the appropriate common names have disappeared, for instance in Polish *Chelm* from its original appellative *chelm* which meant "hill"),

(b) appearing on the grounds of a given language (topographical expressions generally of clear meaning and construction e.g. *Rzeczulka* "small river")

(c) borrowed from other languages, including substrata languages. These are names taken from other languages, adapted to the phonetic and morphological system of one's own language. For instance, many water names in Poland in the Mazury region are of Prussian (Baltic origin).

Geographical names from one's own language region are a treasure-trove of knowledge about a given nation's past, of former settlement relations, expressed values and of material and spiritual culture.

Apart from the above mentioned name categories, geographical names from nearer and farther countries also function, indeed from the whole of this planet. The names of countries and their capitals, of politically and economically important regions etc. are primarily essential in current usage. These geographical names are presently submitted to national standardization in many countries, becoming the subjects of international discussion and even diplomatic disputes.

In each nation's daily experience, in normal conversations, in the mass media, in culture and economic life, geographical names frequently appear. They relate to objects from one's own territory and from beyond its borders. Some from outside a country's territory have a long history in a given language, where their language form differs greatly from the original – these are called exonyms. Every language and every community has its own unique lexicon of geographical names, including exonyms. These names, too, are carriers of knowledge concerning early and contemporary culture and language contacts with other nations.

In the past such contacts were of a direct nature in general. People travelled to other countries to trade, they appeared among neighbours as invaders, studied abroad, settled in other countries in the search for better living

conditions etc. Travellers told stories of foreign countries and the cities, rivers and mountains they had seen. Settlers named topographical objects where they settled, according to the customs of their own people. The lexicon of geographical names was enriched in various ways but it must be stressed that in previous times names were borrowed by speaking and by ear which means that the oldest borrowed names often differ from the originals. It also must be remarked that their phonetics changed as did all other expressions in a given language which is why, in the Czech language, the name is Rim and not Rome (in Polish it is Rzym, borrowed from the Czech), Benátky 'Venice' and Recko 'Greece'. The large number of such examples speaks of the early intensive contacts of the Czechs (Bohemians) with West Europe, with some of these names being taken over by the Poles.

The invention of printing had much to do in changing knowledge of the world. It also led to the 16th-century revolutionary reform of education concerning a substantial number of people. Not only direct contacts but primarily books became the source of knowledge about foreign countries and geographical names. These were mostly books in Latin since Latin remained the literary language used by the educated in Europe. Many west European place and country names in Polish date from that period, e.g. for the German region: *Akwizgran* (*Aachen*), *Moguncja* (*Mainz*), *Monachium* (*München*), *Ratyzbona* (*Regensburg*), *Trewir* (*Trier*) etc. New geographical discoveries and foreign conquests by west European countries resulted in their languages being the source of new geographical onomastics e.g. from South America, China and India. Russian became the intermediary language as regards north Asian regions, mainly in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Very many geographical names perform not only an indexing (onomastic) function but also assume a symbolic meaning and commence a second life in a nation's language and culture. Sentimental and patriotic considerations led to many names like *New York*, *New Caledonia*, *Nova Scotia* etc. appearing on world maps. These were created by settlers expressing nostalgia for their motherland through creating names of that kind.

But not all transferred names were the work of settlers. Some existed in a culture as symbols of spiritual achievements, of natural beauty etc. Some were even appellated to become common names. Universities were called *Athens* in elegant language, even encyclopaedic books being called that. *Arcady* was a name given to English-style parks which were all the rage in 18th-century aristocratic residences. *Wenecja* (*Venice*) was the name of several Polish localities with a system of canals.

Many emigrants left east and central Europe in the 19th century for America in the search for better living conditions, the period from which America's importance as a symbol of prosperity and richness dates.

Certain geographical names, mainly of localities and rivers related to important historical events also have a symbolic meaning in a nation's culture. Certain particularly momentous events are known by symbolic names in wider, supranational reference like *Thermopile*, *Canossa* and *Yalta*, these names also becoming common names signifying 'disaster', 'humiliation', 'supranational politics' etc.

Naming products by the place where they come from is a very old custom, excellent examples being the names of wines, e.g. French *champagne*, Portuguese *Madera*, and Hungarian *Tokai*. The same was true of fabrics but their names disappeared together with the disappearance of the originals. One could mention here the Shetland kind of woollen fabric which still lives in the Polish language. Pure bred horses (*Arabians*) and dogs (*Newfoundlands*) are also called by country names.

Certain geographical names connected with tribal or national seats fulfilled and still fulfil a uniting function, being an important factor in constructing national or ethnical identity. This is often the case with river names, for instance *Wisła* for Polish people, *Dniepr* for Ukrainians and *Rhine* for Germans. It was not a river but the characteristic mountain *Kriván* which became the symbol of unity and national independence efforts for the Slovaks. A similar uniting symbolic function is evident in the works of many romanticists, poets and composers.

With such an additional symbolic impact in specific languages and cultures, it is not surprising that they have been used in advertising and propaganda. Many hotel and cinema names like *Wisła*, *Kraków* and *Warszawa* can be found in Polish towns as can *Danubius* (*Danube*) in Austria, Hungary and Slovakia. During the period of “real socialism” hotels and cinemas were given names like *Friendship* for propaganda purposes as well as geographical names borrowed from “friendly fraternal” countries, usually the names of their capital cities. Today, geographical names of prosperous and exotic countries which take pride of place, to mention but the many small shops which bear the proud name of *Manhattan* in Polish cities and localities, while even kiosks serving Chinese and Vietnamese dishes are called *Shanghai*.

Geographical names travel a similar road in many languages and cultures from common names of topological nature to proper names indicating specific objects. Proper nouns are appellated, assume metaphorical meanings and become symbols. Those which express positive values are next used to create the names of companies, industrial plants, products etc. Only general associations are sometimes linked to geographical names. For instance cigarettes called *Giewont* (the name of a mountain) are associated with sport, and that means health, the conclusion being “those cigarettes are healthy”. *Belvedere* vodka brings an elegant, elite place to mind, hence the conclusion that “this is a beverage for the privileged”.

Only a small part of the wide subject matter of geographical names in a nation’s language and culture has been outlined in this paper. But I wish to stress that all names mentioned herein constitute the heritage not of one nation but are the common property of all mankind.
