

Chapter 8 - Geographical Names

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Maps are superb tools for getting to know our environment, to understand about distances, or to plan a journey. They show us how our location on Earth influences the climate and the possibilities to earn a living. But they only can show us these relationships when they bear geographical names. Look at the map in figure 8.1. It shows (parts of) 5 countries, separated by boundaries, and towns and cities and rivers and canals, but it does not tell us anything because we cannot relate to all these mapped objects as countries, settlements and rivers. They are not named. We can only refer to the objects rendered on the map in an indirect way, like 'the big city in the southwest of the map,' or 'the sea in the northwest corner of the map.'

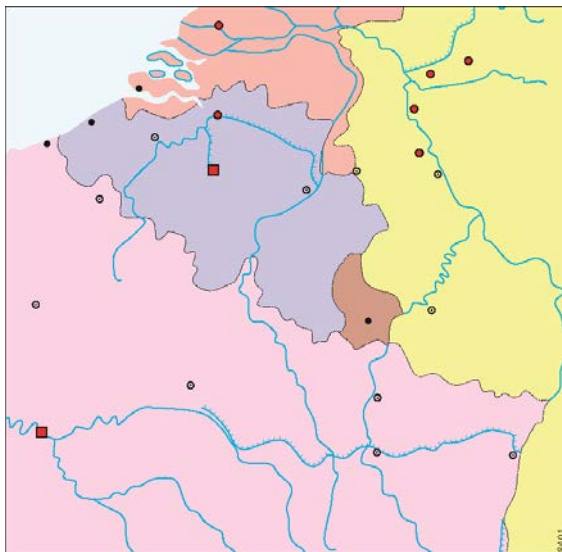


Figure 8.1 Map without geographical names.

Figure 8.2 shows the difference made by the addition of geographical names. Now every mapped object (except for a few smaller rivers and canals) can be directly referred to. The 'big city in the southwest corner of the map' now can be addressed directly as Paris, for instance, and the sea turns out to be the North Sea. Now it is easy to describe the relationships between the mapped objects; for instance, 'Liège is located in-between Brussels and Aachen,' or 'Luxembourg is bounded by France in the South, by Germany in the East and by Belgium in the North and the West.' The characteristics of all mapped objects now can be easily listed, for instance, in a gazetteer. A *gazetteer* is an alphabetical list of the geographical names within an area, like a country, with an indication of the location of the objects they refer to (expressed, for instance, in geographical coordinates, see Section 9.1), the nature of the named object (is it a town, a river, a canal or a country?) and of their official spelling.

For the official spelling, we have to look first at the way geographical names are collected during the survey of an area in order to produce a topographical map (see Chapter 5). Topographers will visit municipality offices in order to collect the names used locally to refer to the geographical objects. Sometimes they will also go into the countryside and ask the local inhabitants for the names of the lakes, hills, hamlets or forests in their neighbourhoods. All the names collected in this way will be submitted to a names bureau that will check whether the spelling of the name is correct according to the official orthography of the country's language(s) or whether the spelling reflects the local pronunciation of the name. When everyone agrees what the spelling of the name should be, it is officially defined. We call this process *standardization of geographical names*. All the



Figure 8.2 Shows the same area as mapped in figure 8.1, but here geographical names have been added.

names of which the spelling has been standardised will then be published in official lists, so that everyone can see how they are to be spelled.

Because their spelling has been standardised, geographical names can also serve as links in geographical information systems. Statistics for municipalities can be linked to boundary files with the boundaries of these same municipalities, allowing for digital mapping of these statistical data. A procedure called '*parsing*' allows us to retrieve all documents in a database in which a specific geographical name is mentioned. But, again, this only works if everyone agrees about the spelling of that particular name. Here we are frequently confronted with the problem that people from a different language community than ours will use different names for the same geographical objects as we do.



Figure 8.3 The same area as mapped in figure 8.1, now with the officially standardized local names (endonyms).

Names like Trèves, Cologne and Dunkirk, used in the English language in order to refer to places that are called officially Trier, Köln and Dunkerque by their local inhabitants, are called exonyms. *Exonyms* are names used in a particular language for a geographical object outside the area where that language is spoken and differing in their spelling from the names used in the official language(s) of that area where the object is located. Trier, Köln and Dunkerque are examples of *endonyms*, or locally official standardized names. Exonyms often emerged in a process of adaptation of foreign names to our language, and frequently as such they have become part of our history, and our cultural heritage. In English history, the ‘battle of Jutland’ in the First World War refers to the naval battle off the coast of the Danish peninsula called Jylland in Danish, for which Jutland is the English exonym. The chicken breed called

Leghorn in English refers to the Italian port of Livorno where these chicken were exported from. Leghorn is the English exonym for Livorno. While it is understandable that these exonyms are part of our history, it is also understandable that in view of international name standardization, the use of endonyms is the preferred mode of communication.



Figure 8.4 Finnish exonyms for Western Europe.

The existence of two or more names for one and the same object is called *allonyms*. A good example is the German town of Cologne: the endonym is Köln; in

English and French it is called Cologne; in Dutch Keulen; in Spanish and Italian Colonia; in Czech Kolín,; and in Polish Kolonia. Opposite of allonyms is the concept of *homonyms*: the fact that the same name can refer to different geographical objects. The Scottish town of Perth has the same name as the capital of Western Australia. Birmingham in Britain bears the same name as the capital of the American state of Alabama. Stratford upon Avon is the birthplace of William Shakespeare in England, on the banks of the river Avon. But the combination of the place called Stratford and the river Avon also occurs in Australia and in New Zealand. How do we distinguish between them? Here it becomes necessary to add features to these names: Birmingham, Alabama versus Birmingham, England, or Frankfurt am Oder versus Frankfurt am Rhein.

National and International standardisation of geographical names

In an ideal world, every geographical object would be recognised by its unique name, which would only refer to this particular object. In order to get as close as possible to this ideal situation, we first apply the process of national standardization of geographical names: every country decides what should be the spelling of the names of the geographical objects within its borders, and it communicates these spelling decisions to all other countries, by publishing gazetteers, so that inhabitants of those other countries would know what these official spellings are.

The next step would be the process of international standardization. There is a complicating factor here, and that is that we not only speak different languages all over the world, but we also use different writing systems. In order to have ‘*univocity*’—the existence of one unique standard name for each geographical object in each writing system—it requires that there only be one single, official way to convert names from one

writing system, like Arabic, Chinese or Amharic to another writing system like the Roman alphabet. In this way, local names that have been standardized officially in one language and writing system would be converted into standardized names in another writing system.



Figure 8.5 Writing systems used in Southeast Asia: Bengal (Bangladesh), Burmese (Myanmar), Thai (Thailand), Cambodian (Cambodia), Laotian (Laos), Roman (Vietnam) and Chinese (China) writing systems. (© Menno Bolder)

For most of the writing systems displayed in figure 8.5, the United Nations has recognised official conversion systems. The name of a conversion system depends on the writing system it converts into. Conversion into the Roman script is called a *romanization system*. Pinyin is the name of the romanization system recognised by the UN in order to convert names from the Chinese writing system into the Roman alphabet.



Figure 8.6 Southeast Asia with geographical names converted into the Roman alphabet. (© Menno Bolder)

It can be seen in figure 8.6 that in many names special signs have been added to the letters of the Roman alphabet in order to modify the normal pronunciation of these letters. Some of the letters even have two of these signs added to them (an example is the letter *e* in Việt Nam), but that is exceptional. Not only do these pronunciation-modifying signs, called *diacritical signs*, change the sound of the names, they would also influence alphabetization, the sequence of names when arranged or listed alphabetically. In Danish, for instance, geographical names like Amager or Als fall under the first letter of the alphabet, while names like Ålborg or Århus come after the letter Z.

Endonyms can be converted from one language to another in three different ways:

- when both languages use the same alphabet the name can just be copied, including all the diacritical signs used from the first language to the second (e.g., Polish, German, Danish)—

Warszawa (Warsaw), Köln (Cologne), København (Copenhagen). In some countries this procedure is called transposition;

- names can be transferred "letter by letter" according to conversion tables (see also figure 8.7), (e.g. from Cyrillic to Latin, from Greek to Latin, from Arabic script to Latin, etc.)—София (Sofia), Αθήνα (Athens), رصفأا (al-Uṣṣur, Luxor). This procedure is called transliteration; and

Systems of romanization

The national system of romanization (2002) is as follows:

1	ა	a	13	ბ	n	25	შ	sh
2	ბ	b	14	ო	o	26	ჩ	ch
3	გ	g	15	პ	p'	27	ც	ts
4	დ	d	16	ჯ	zh	28	ძ	dz
5	ე	e	17	რ	r	29	წ	ts'
6	ვ	v	18	ს	s	30	ჭ	ch'
7	ზ	z	19	ტ	t'	31	ხ	kh
8	თ	t	20	უ	u	32	ჯ	j
9	ი	i	21	ფ	p	33	ჰ	h
10	კ	k'	22	ქ	k			
11	ლ	l	23	ყ	gh			
12	მ	m	24	ვ	q'			

Figure 8.7. Example of a conversion table, from the Georgian to the Roman alphabet, as proposed by Georgia.

- the sounds of the name can be rendered in the second language according to the pronunciation of the letters in its alphabet For example the Chinese name of the capital of China in Chinese characters: 北京 of China in Chinese) is rendered Beijing in English, Peking in German, Pechino in Italian, Pekin in Spanish, etc. This procedure of phonetic rewriting is called transcription.

Functions of geographical names

Geographical names not only serve in relating to our environment or as links in information systems, but they also play a role in brand names. Bordeaux, Beaujolais or Champagne not only are names of French regions, but they also refer to specific wines. And the use of these geographical names for these products can even be protected; it is not allowed to refer to some bubbly wines as Champagne unless they are actually produced in the Champagne region from grapes harvested there. A similar use of geographical names is valid for cheese: Edam and Gouda are names for typical Dutch cheese types, while Gorgonzola and Parmesan refer to Italian cheese types.

Most geographical names, when first given, were transparent. That is, their meaning was clear to those that gave the names. Rio de Janeiro is the name of a river in Brazil that was first sighted by the Portuguese 1 January 1502. Later on, the name of the river was transferred to the settlement that grew up on its bank. Cape Town is the English translation of the Dutch name Kaapstad, given to the settlement built by the Dutch in the 17th century close to the Cape of Good Hope, as a victualing station for the Dutch ships on their route from the Netherlands to the Spice Islands in the Moluccas. Some names lay claim to an area: the name Vladivostok, the Russian main naval port on the Pacific Ocean, means Ruler of the East. 'Nya Sverige' (or New Sweden) is the name of a 17th century Swedish colony on the banks of the Delaware River in the present-day United States. Like other European powers, it laid claim to a part of the North American continent. France claimed its 'Nouvelle France,' England its 'New England' and the Netherlands its 'Nieuw Nederland.' When the Dutch first arrived in the present-day Australia in the 17th century, they called it New Holland, after their principal province of Holland.

When the British at the end of the 18th century claimed it, they were not happy with this Dutch name and they introduced a new, more neutral sounding name, Australia, derived from the Latin word 'australis' which means southern. This new name thus referred to the 'southern' continent.

Names carry meaning. The name Amsterdam is the present-day version of the mediaeval name Amstelredamme, which means the dam in the river Amstel where the first hamlet of this name was situated in the 13th century. So names describe the original situation of the location or its surrounding area. Dutch names ending in -lo (Almelo, Hengelo) refer to locations in clearings in the forest; names ending in -koop (Nieuwkoop, Boskoop) refer to settlements created when the peat areas were drained and cleared for agriculture; and names ending in -drecht (Sliedrecht, Zwijndrecht) refer to names of settlements built along the dikes in the Middle Ages. Like in personal names, where trends to name children after pop or movie stars alternate with traditional names or fancy French names, there also have been trends in naming towns.— And by studying names it sometimes becomes possible to establish when these names were first given. The study of the meaning of place-names is called *etymology*.

Name elements

Geographical names sometimes consist of a single word and sometimes of multiple words—examples are London and Newcastle upon Tyne (this addition to the name Newcastle serves to distinguish it from other towns called Newcastle). But even if a name consists of a single word, it may have been constructed from different elements. The name of the Scottish capital Edinburgh consists of two elements, *burgh*, meaning fort and the personal name *Eidyn*, so the name would mean the Fort of Eidyn. We call the part that describes the nature of the named object, in this case -burgh, the generic part of

the name, and the part that refers to the person whom the fort was named after, the specific part. Sometimes the generic part is a separate word, like in Mount Everest, Forest of Dean, or Bay of Fundy. Sometimes it is combined with the specific part, like in Newcastle, Blackpool or Plymouth (naming the settlement at the mouth of the river Plym). The distinction of generic and specific elements of names is relevant regarding exonyms. Sometimes when a name is transferred from one language or writing system to another, the generic parts of these names are translated into the new language. So the Greek name Αἰγαίο Πέλαγος (Aigaiō Pelagos) is converted into English as Aegean Sea, and the Russian name мыс Дежнёва (Mys Dezhnev), a cape named after the Russian explorer Semyon Dezhnev, is converted to Cape Dezhnev.

Historical names and name planning

Many geographical names used in the past are no longer current and official. This can be caused by changes in the official orthography of a language. It can also be caused by conquest when one country occupies (part of) another country and imposes its own names on the geographical objects in the conquered lands. It can be caused by decolonization as well, when the names used by the former colonial power are exchanged for new names in the language of the newly independent people. In figure 8.8, some examples are given of new names (in black) that emerged in Africa after the decolonization process that happened in the 1960s and replaced former colonial names (in red). These former geographical names that have been replaced by the current new names that are now official locally are called *historical names*. Examples of these historical names are Batavia, the former Dutch name of the Indonesian capital Jakarta; Leningrad, the former Communist name of the Russian port city on the Baltic Sea called Saint Petersburg (in Russian, Санкт-Петербург), converted into the

Roman alphabet as Sankt-Petersburg); and Madras, the former name of the Indian city Chennai, capital of the Indian state Tamil Nadu.



Figure 8.8. Some examples of post-colonial names in Africa.

Whenever names are changed, it is good practice to place the former and the new name side by side for a given time period so that the population can get used to the new name, and foreigners unfamiliar with the new name can still find their way around. This is an aspect of name planning. Name planning can be defined as the deliberate effort to influence the spelling of place-names, primarily in order to improve communication. There can be other reasons; however, for instance, shedding of the toponymic influences regarded as foreign.



Figure 8.9 Detail from Dutch school atlas, 1961, with the names Zuidchinees Bergland and Zuidchinese zee. (Bosatlas, 41th edition, 1961)

Name planning is also needed when the orthographic rules of a language change. Even seemingly small changes, like the introduction of hyphens after cardinal directions instead of joining those words to the main specific name elements, may result in thousands of changes in a reference atlas. In the 1960s, in the Dutch language, the words Zuid (south) and Chinese were



Figure 8.10 Detail from Dutch school atlas, 2006. (Bosatlas, 53rd edition, 2006)

joined while from 2000 onwards these words had to be separated by hyphens, as can be seen when comparing figures 8.9 and 8.10. The impact of such spelling measures on cartographical products can necessitate a major overhaul of them.

Further references:

For those interested in toponymy and cartography, we refer to the online web course in toponymy, to be accessed from either the website of UNGEGN, the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (at <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/ungegn/default.html>) or to the website of the Commission on Education of the International Cartographic Association (<http://lazarus.elte.hu/cet/index.html>) under Internet Cartography Teaching courses).

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The UNGEGN website also provides information on national and international geographical names standardization procedures, addresses of national bureaus in charge of geographical names, and access to national *toponymical guidelines*. These guidelines inform map editors and other editors on how geographical names in specific language areas are spelled, how countries are dealing with names in multilingual areas, and how names are pronounced.

UNGEGN itself also produces a global gazetteer, which can be accessed at <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/geonames/>, which presently lists the names of all cities with over 100,000 inhabitants and their pronunciation. It also has all country names in the 6 official UN languages (including Russian, Arabic and Chinese) and the local language.