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Culture, heritage and language recognition: Exonyms

Excessive use of exonyms by Google

Submitted by Austria **

Summary:

The report is focused on the practice by Google to notating on its weather forecast maps, for an audience in a certain language, a maximum of place names not in the endonym version (i.e. in the version locally used), but as exonyms in the context language (i.e. in the language of the map user and of the map title and map legend). That however, includes not only exonyms in popular use in the context language, but also outdated exonyms as well as morphological and phonetic adaptations of the endonym to the context language, and sometimes also historical or only locally known minority endonyms corresponding to the context language. That practice contradicts not only all United Nations resolutions on exonyms (e.g. II/28, on lists of exonyms; II/29, exonyms; and IV/20, on reduction of exonyms) and impedes communication with the local population and with fellow speakers of the context language. While such practices may help with the pronunciation of names, the name notated in that way is hardly recognized by anybody else. It is suggested that Google be advised to consult lists of standardized exonyms that already exist for several countries and languages or to refer to national name authorities when it comes to deciding which range of exonyms is to be used.

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Excessive use of exonyms by Google

Theoretical background

From a purely pragmatic point of view the choice between endonym and exonym in a given communicative situation is determined by the question which of the names will be understood (correctly related to the feature designated by the name) by the communication partner or with higher probability be understood and which is the culturally sensitive and polite name to be applied in this situation. This again depends on whether the communication is international or domestic, official or non-official. It depends also on the educational level of the communication partners as well as on the context of this communication. It is of course also possible to use both endonym and exonym to ascertain the success of the communication as recommended by UN resolutions.

While the UN developed by their respective resolutions of the 1970s and 1980s a rather sceptical position opposite exonyms and softened it only from 2003 onward, when by the UNESCO Convention on the Safeguarding for the Intangible Cultural Heritage all oral expressions and traditions – implicitly geographical names including exonyms – were covered, it is also to be recognized that exonyms are needed and functional in several fields of communication. They emerge and develop therefore in quite a spontaneous way by adaptation of the endonym to the audience or context language, if they are not anyway former endonyms that have just changed from endonym to exonym quality e.g. by population exchange. Like all the other elements of a language exonyms come and go, get into and get out of use. They can also emerge suddenly, e.g. prompted by natural and other disasters. They exist anyway only for a minority of prominent geographical features familiar to a certain receiver community and there is no danger that they augment ambiguity and jeopardize standardization, because all the features denoted additionally by exonyms are prominent enough not to be mixed up with any other feature.

Google's practice

On this background and taking into account most specifically the very pragmatic aspect whether the exonym will by the communication partner be understood (correctly related to the feature designated by the name), it is also obvious that exonyms are not to be artificially invented or revitalized, if they have got out of use. This exactly, however, is done by Google, when they label on maps used for weather forecasts or in Google Earth places by names that convey the impression to be exonyms in the relevant audience language but are purely invented and void of any tradition of use in the audience language and anyway out of current use.

This is to be illustrated by two topical examples of 2024.

The first (Fig. 1) presents the weather forecast for Cres, a town in Croatia on the homonymous island. *Cres*, the Croatian name of this town has the Italian equivalent *Cherso*, which is also an endonym according to UN Glossary definitions due to an autochthonous Italian minority residing there. The Google weather forecast, however, presents the name *Kersch* as the German exonym and no other name for this place. But this 'exonym' is neither in current use in any part of the German-speaking area, nor is it a traditional German name for this place, which could perhaps be found on old maps. It is obviously just a 'Germanization' (morphological and phonetic adaptation) of the Italian name without any historical justification or empirical evidence (e.g. by asking German-speaking tourists, how they would call this place).

Behind the name of the town figures *Gespanschaft Küstenland-Bergland* as the name of the larger administrative unit, in which the town is located. This is a verbal translation of the Croatian endonym *Primorsko-goranska županija* and – certainly in this version – not a better means of

communicating this feature to German speakers than the endonym. The Croatian Wikipedia offers *Gespanschaft Primorje-Gorski kotar* as a German exonym and *Primorje – Gorski Kotar County* as an English equivalent.



Fig. 1: Google weather forecast for the town of Cres in Croatia (Screenshot by Peter Jordan 2024)

The second example (Fig. 2) is even more void of any communication value. It shows from a Google weather forecast for a German-speaking audience a section of the southern Pannonian Basin including larger parts of Hungary and adjacent regions of Croatia (in the SW), Serbia (in the SE) and Romania (also in the SE). Features useful for orientation are besides state borders Lake Balaton in the NW part of the section and the Danube crossing the section in the middle in vertical direction.

A ‘true’ German exonym in the sense of a name known by a wider share of people in any part of the German-speaking sphere, if only in adjacent Austria, is just *Fünfkirchen* [Pécs] in Hungary. *Szegedin* [Szeged] in Hungary, *Kopreinitz* [Koprivnica] in Croatia and *Großkikinda* [Kikinda] in Serbia are indeed traditional, but outdated German exonyms not anymore recommended for further use, e.g., by the “Recommendations for the Rendering of Geographical Names in Austrian Educational Media” [Empfehlungen zur Schreibung geographischer Namen in österreichischen Bildungsmedien], in 2012 edited by the Austrian Board on Geographical Names.

Großkirchen [Nagykanizsa], *Egersee* [Zalaegerszeg], *Kesthell* [Keszthely], *Wesprim* [Veszprém], *Schiofok* [Siófok], *Kopisch* [Kaposvár], *Tammasching* [Tamási], *Sechshard* [Szekszárd], *Hallasch* [Kiskunhalas], *Ketschkemet* [Kecskemét], *Szentesch* [Szentés] and *Thur* [Mezőtúr] in Hungary, *Weretz* [Virovitica] in Croatia, and *Tschantawir* [Čantavir] in Serbia are either at least partly historical endonyms of the partly just historical local German minority groups or approaches to the endophone in the local majority language by phonetic German orthography notation. *Bjelovar* in Croatia and *Subotica* in Serbia are endonyms.

While the use of just locally known (historical) endonyms is not functional for international communication, approaches to the endophone by phonetic German orthography notation may be some excuse for creating new exonyms. But exonyms created in this way have nevertheless very restricted communication value, since their notation is widely unknown and cannot be found in any other publication. It lets also the question arise, why *Subotica* was not phonetically notated as *Subotitza*, since even better educated German speakers but not acquainted with Serbian or the region in question would pronounce it as *Subotika*.

The most peculiar case is *Neustadt an der Donau*, a verbal translation of the Hungarian endonym *Dunaujváros*. It has not any tradition in German and is the translation of a name that was applied only after 1961 to a place that was in the Stalinist period called *Sztálinváros* and before

1951 *Pentele* or *Dunapentele*. Not any German speaker will associate the name *Neustadt an der Donau* with this place.



Fig. 2: Google weather forecast for the southern Pannonian Basin (Screenshot by Peter Jordan 2024)

Conclusion

As demonstrated by two examples for a German-speaking audience, the naming practice of Google weather forecasts is characterized by an excessive use of exonyms that does not only contradict all UN resolutions, but also the pragmatic goal to be understood by the communication partner. Google applies in addition to some current endonyms and some exonyms in current use a lot of outdated exonyms as well as mainly historical German minority endonyms and majority endonyms in a German phonetic notation trying to approach in this way the endophone. This provides the map with the impression of being user-friendly and easy to read but impedes in fact any communication on the place designated by the name – with locals as well as with fellow German speakers. It would instead be advisable to stick to the lists of standardized exonyms in the meantime published by several countries (see the references for a selection) or refer in absence of such lists to the relevant national place-name authority, when it comes to the question whether an exonym is to be used or not. It is also advisable to observe – in line with UN resolutions – the principle to add wherever possible the endonym to the exonym, since it is always useful to know which name is used and how it is notated locally.

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The Group of Experts is requested to:

- (1) discuss the endonym/exonym divide under pragmatic aspects;
- (2) consider how to convince providers like Google of a pragmatically sound exonym use.