UNITED NATIONS GROUP OF EXPERTS ON GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

TWENTY-FIFTH SESSION, NAIROBI, 5-12 MAY 2009

Working Group on Exonyms: Workshop on the Nature of the Endonym, 6 May 2009

THE ENDONYM AND LANGUAGE BOUNDARIES

At the heart of the recent (autumn 2008) correspondence within the Working Group about features which cross language boundaries was the issue of whether a particular feature such as the Danube, which is named as one single feature in several different languages along its length, should be subdivided into sections along language criteria from the endonym/exonym perspective.

The two divergent positions emerging from that correspondence can be summarised as follows[1]:

- An endonym applies only to that portion of a feature within the boundaries of that particular language. Outside this portion this endonym becomes an exonym (*eg* the name *Donau* is an endonym only along the German-speaking portion of the river; when it enters Slovakia *etc* the name *Donau* becomes an exonym).

or:

- An endonym applies to the feature as a whole, but only has on-the-spot application to the portion within the boundaries of that particular language. Outside that portion this endonym will have no local application (*eg* the name *Donau* is the German-language endonym for the river as a whole, but it has no local endonymic application outside the German-speaking portion).

The major issue here is the relationship between a name and a feature, and how we interpret this. Some may argue that features such as the Danube or the Alps are mental or social constructs, created in our minds and existing because we agree to think of them as features. It is true that the mountain we name is more than the sum of its stones; the river we name is more than the transient water that passes along it. We do indeed add our own human value to the literal physical reality. However, even if features are constructs – and the point is debatable – it is those constructs that we name because that is how we identify the feature. The bottom line is that we name the feature, whether we believe it to be a construct or not.

How does this debate fit with our endonym definition? The definition is as follows:

Endonym: Name of a geographical feature in an official or well-established language occurring in that area where the feature is situated.

In the context of the current debate about language boundaries, the crucial aspect of this definition is its relationship between name and feature. The endonym is defined as the name of the feature in a relevant language, not the name of a certain portion of the feature. The relevant language has to occur where the feature is situated, not where a certain portion of the feature is situated. The feature itself – not a portion or section of it – is the object named by the endonym.

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[1] The following bullet points are based on a very helpful summary provided by Roman Stani-Fertl in November 2008. I have slightly modified Roman's wording and added the examples.

The point at issue here is the crucial distinction between the **existence** of an endonym and the relevant **application** of that endonym. *Donau* exists as the German-language endonym for the entire length of that great river, from Germany through to Romania. We acknowledge this whenever a very small-scale German-language map is published, one on which there is only room for a single geographical label for each feature shown. On such a product the label *Donau* will be applied to that river in its entirety (probably not even written along a section where the German language is found) because that is the label in **existence** in the German language. Hungary, Romania, *etc*, will not object to that practice; it is a linguistic matter only and does not imply any ownership or claim. But as soon as the scale of the publication is increased, and room becomes available for additional labels on the map, then it is possible and indeed necessary to convey to the user the fact that **application** of the German-language endonym is of no relevance to those sections of the feature that pass through Hungary or Romania, *etc*. Instead, in those sections of the river, it is the Hungarian-language label *Duna* and the Romanian-language label *Dunărea* that need to be applied as the relevant endonyms.

Thus the **application** of an endonym will vary in relevance from location to location, but the endonym will for that particular language remain in **existence** as the endonym for the entire feature. It is not possible for a single language name such as *Donau* to vacillate between endonym status and exonym status.

So the conclusion must be that the name for the Danube in its entirety is an endonym in the German, Slovak, Hungarian, Serbian, Bulgarian, and Romanian languages, and that the second of the two options outlined near the beginning of this paper is valid:

- An endonym applies to the feature as a whole, but only has on-the-spot application to the portion within the boundaries of that particular language. Outside that portion this endonym will have no local application (*eg* the name *Donau* is the German-language endonym for the river as a whole, but it has no local endonymic application outside the German-speaking portion).

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March 2009