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What is an endonym?
Still a question after decades of standardization

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Abstract

In recent discussions within the Working Group on Exonyms in the context of the naming of trans-national features, two divergent positions with reference to the nature of the endonym evolved. Position A confines the endonym status to portions of a trans-national feature, where the name corresponds to the local language. Position B grants this status to all portions of such a feature. By hinting at the relevance of a feel of place for the definition of the community entitled to name a feature as well as by hinting at the fact that the two positions differ in political sensibility and in complying with usual standardization practices, this paper supports Position A.

1 Introduction

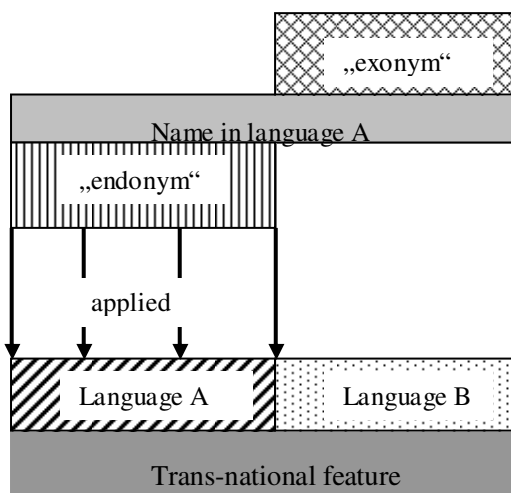
Starting from the question whether names of international waters fall into the exonym-endonym divide or must be attributed to a third terminological category, an intensive e-mail discussion evolved between members of the Working Group on Exonyms. It revealed a basic discordancy as regards the nature of the endonym. This became obvious with features crossing language boundaries or features beyond a single sovereignty (larger rivers, mountain ranges, seas). Two principal positions evolved during this discussion:

Position A: The endonym status of a name is confined to these portions of a trans-national feature, where the name corresponds to the local language. Outside these portions the same name assumes the status of an exonym.

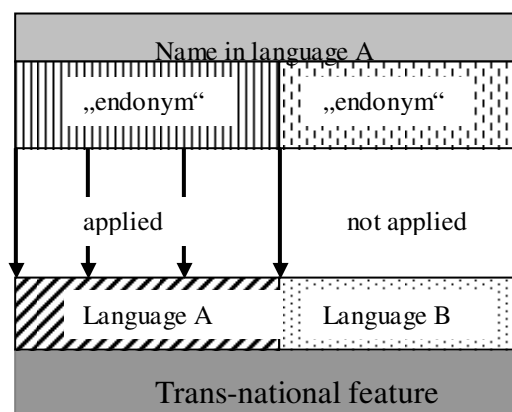
Position B: A name is for its language an endonym also in these portions of a trans-national feature, where the corresponding language is not spoken. In portions where the corresponding language is not spoken, however, the endonym is not “applied”.

The two positions clarified by graphic representation:

Position A



Position B



The two positions clarified by examples:

In the case of the **Alps** Position A would mean that French *les Alpes* has endonym status only in the French-speaking portions of the Alps, while Position B would imply that *les Alpes* enjoys this status also in all the other portions of this trans-national feature, where the local population speaks Italian, German, Slovene or other languages. The endonym status is, however, not effectuated or “applied” in these other portions.

In the case of the **Danube** Position A would mean that German *Donau* has endonym status only along the German-speaking sections of this river (in Germany, Austria), while Position B would imply that the German name can be called an endonym also where the Danube crosses or borders Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Moldavia and Ukraine. The endonym status is, however, not effectuated or “applied” in these other sections.

In the case of the **North Sea** Position A would mean that English *North Sea* has endonym status only for coastal waters along the coasts of the United Kingdom, while Position B would imply that the English name is an endonym also for the coastal waters of Norway, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium. The endonym status is, however, not effectuated or “applied” for coastal waters of these other countries.

This basic discordancy moves within the limits of our new definition of the endonym which says that an endonym is a “name of a geographical feature in an official or well-established language occurring in that area where the feature is situated”. Indeed, French is a language in the Alps as much as German is a language at the Danube and English a language at the North Sea. Obviously the definition is wide enough to allow for very divergent interpretations.

Position B, however, establishes a third category of endonyms. So far we had standardized and not standardized endonyms. Following Position B we would also have “not applied” endonyms.

Both positions also claim to be in line with the essence of the endonym to be “the name from within”, while the exonym is “the name from without”.

This paper, however, intends to show that this is true only for Position A (Chapter 2). It will also try to demonstrate that the two positions differ in political sensibility (Chapter 3) and in complying with usual standardization practices (Chapter 4).

2 The group of people to define the endonym is confined to the community with a feel of the place

When Yi-Fu Tuan, a disciple of Carl Sauer, the founder of the Berkeley School of Cultural Geography, describes the relation between people born in a place and socialized in it by the following words, he outlines the “endonym community”, i.e. the group of people whose names for the place can be called endonyms. He says: „[Place] is made up of experiences, mostly fleeting and undramatic, repeated day after day and over the span of years. It is a unique blend of sights, sounds, and smells, a unique harmony of natural and artificial rhythms

such as times of sunset, of work and play. The feel of a place is registered in one's muscles and bones."¹

A feel of place in this sense can be acquired only by inhabitants, by persons having been socialized in this place and have left it later or by people having developed a close and emotional tie to this place in their later life. It can also be acquired only for a portion of a larger trans-national feature, not, e.g., for the Alps in total, for the entire course of the Danube or for all coasts of the North Sea, not to speak of oceans.²

Yes, the Alps are regarded as one geographical feature; but only based on tectonical criteria and as a mental construct. In fact they are composed of many different subunits looking very different and characterised by various sets of ecological factors. This variety is reflected by individual names of the various subunits, the names of valleys and mountain ranges.³

People inhabiting the Dolomites may have a feel of place for a portion of the Dolomites or for the Dolomites in total, but not for the Vienna Woods, although both are portions of the same geographical feature (Alps).

Inhabitants of a Croatian island may have a feel of place for this island, for the archipelago and the coastal waters around it⁴ and certainly also for Croatia as a country, but not for the opposite Italian coast of the Adriatic Sea.

Inhabitants of the Danube Delta may have a feel of place for this amphibious landscape and the branches of the Danube crossing it, but not for a narrow valley section of this same river somewhere upstream in Bavaria or Austria.

While a trans-national geographical feature is a category of space, endonyms in the sense of names from within are bound to place. And "place" is in this context not just a part, a subunit of "space", but a category in its own right possessing a different quality which evolves from the unique relation with a group of people who feel a sense of belonging. "Place" in this sense may indeed be regarded as a synonym of "home". "Place" is also mostly composed of several geographical features or portions of features, e.g. a village and its surrounding hills, waters, fields and woods.

Only the group of people having acquired a feel of place in this sense may have names for it that can be termed "endonyms".

Les Alpes, then, is the French name for the entire trans-national feature "Alps", but an endonym only in these portions, for which French-speakers have a feel of place. Outside these portions, the feel of place is with other linguistic groups and it is their name, which can be termed "endonym".

Donau, then, is the German name for the trans-national feature "Danube" in total, but an endonym only in these sections, where German-speakers have a feel of place. Outside these portions, the feel of place is with speakers of Slovakian, Hungarian, Croatian, Serbian,

¹ Tuan, Yi-Fu: *Space and place: The perspective of experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1977, pp. 183f

² It is, however, true that the feel of place, the feel of belonging may refer to provinces and countries that can be larger than trans-national geographical features. It can even not be excluded that Europeans may once develop a feel of place for Europe....!

³ It happens that a mountain (= one feature) is named differently from different valleys and that different sections of a valley bear different names.

⁴ For coast dwellers coastal waters are indeed an integrated part of their living sphere, a source of alimentation, a place of communication and a workplace. They make coastal waters part of their festivities and sacred rites. This must, however, not lead to the conclusion that this attitude extends to the open sea or even to other coasts of a sea.

Romanian, Bulgarian, Moldavian and Ukrainian and in addition some linguistic minorities (among them locally also Germans) and it is their name, which can be termed “endonym”. *North Sea*, then, is the English name for the whole trans-national feature, but an endonym only for these coastal waters, for which English-speakers have a feel of place. Along the Norwegian coast, e.g., there are Norwegian-speakers, who feel this sense of belonging and it is their name which deserves the term “endonym”.

3 Naming is an act of appropriation

The naming of persons, animals, things as well as geographical features (as mental constructs) is an act of appropriation. Who has the power of naming is the owner, the dominator or at least the person assigned responsibility or to take care. When Genesis says that “God makes every beast of the field and every bird of the air,...and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name...”, this may well be interpreted as empowering man to be the dominator of all creation.

This affects also exonyms and is not the least the reason, why they are politically such a sensitive matter. To use exonyms as if they were endonyms (under the pretext that these places were “in our hands earlier” or that there were still splinters of a certain linguistic community there) aggravates this effect.

This affects also names in minority languages. Bilingual or multilingual naming frequently stirs up conflict. It is felt as an expression of the fact that ownership or dominance is not only in the hands of one group, but that another group claims to define or to share the identity of a place.

When groups far from the outside (just within the same trans-national feature) claim to have an endonym (a name from within!) for a place, this means even more a challenge to the local community: people not present at the place (in contrast to a linguistic minority) claim to have the power of naming, to have “a name from within”. This is comparable only to the insensitive use of exonyms or to the use of exonyms as if they were endonyms.

4 National standardization respects customary usage – why should terminological distinction between endonym and exonym not do the same?

It is common practice in most countries that the name used for a certain geographical feature by the local population is the starting point for national standardization. Usually, owners of individual houses or farmsteads, the inhabitants of settlements and communes or the representatives of a commune are entitled to name the place. Surveyors and topographers go into the field and document the customary usage of names for natural features.

Names authorities at higher administrative levels and at the national level usually play rather a receptive and consultative role. In general it is also avoided to impose names from without on a namescape for commemorative, commercial and other reasons. Politically motivated renaming often breaks this rule, but is mostly considered as imposed by local people and rejected and modified as soon as possible.

This principle in national standardization is compatible only with the position that endonym status can be attributed just to the name used by the local language community and not to a

name used by people speaking a different language and living in a remote portion of the (same) feature.