

## Towards a Common Onomastic Terminology? The Next Step

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### Abstract

At the 21<sup>st</sup> ICOS congress in Uppsala (2002) I read a paper “Towards a New Millennium – Towards a Common Onomastic Terminology?” in which I proposed to establish a special commission of onomasticians, the aim of which would be to draw up an international manual of basic onomastic terms with their definitions. The ICOS Terminology Group was established two years later (2004) and the first outputs of its work were presented at the ICOS congresses in Pisa (2005) and Toronto (2008). In this paper, I will briefly summarise the history and give an overview of possible next steps of the work, along with some suggestions and recommendations on how to proceed when working with onomastic terminology.

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Onomastic terminology, like the terminology of any other scientific discipline, is generally based on the theoretical concepts of the relevant discipline. Therefore several different terminological systems have been created on the basis of the differing traditions of the onomastic schools. This situation has resulted in the considerable degree of inconsistency that is currently prevalent in onomastic terminology; specific neologisms and terms formed ad hoc are frequently apparent, whereas, on the other hand, the terminology associated with the organisation of the onymy is not sufficiently sophisticated in regard to proprial naming processes, nor with the functioning of proper names in communication and their linguistic structure (cf. Šrámek, 2003, 35; Harvalík, 2005b).

It is understandable that ambiguity and uncertainty of terms leads to confusion. Eventually, however, terms become both more precise and more stable but, unless this process is coordinated, this stabilisation will become a long-term process with an uncertain outcome. Therefore the terminology utilised should either be the result of teamwork and agreement or it is possible that its binding enactment could be considered. For this reason, at the 21<sup>st</sup> International Congress of Onomastic Sciences in Uppsala in 2002, the establishment of a special onomastic commission under the auspices of the International Council of Onomastic Sciences (ICOS) was proposed, the goal of which would be to assemble an international guidebook to the onomastic terms in use, together with their definitions (Harvalík, 2005a). This terminological group that works at the ICOS Board of Directors was founded at the meeting of the ICOS Board held in Prague 2004 (26<sup>th</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup> March) and currently has 16 members who represent individual languages, countries or regions and onomastic schools (Maria Giovanna Arcamone, Hubert Bergmann, Donatella Bremer, Pierre-Henri Billy, Dunja Brozović Rončević, Enzo Caffarelli, Richard Coates, Doreen Gerritzen, Isolde Hausner, Milan Harvalík, Naftali Kadmon, Adrian Koopman, Dieter Kremer, Julia Kuhn, Staffan Nyström, Mats Wahlberg). From 2004-2009 its President was Milan Harvalík; since 2009 it has been led by Julia Kuhn.

Due to the long-standing traditions of deeply-rooted terms in the individual onomastic schools the activities of the group do not consist of any method of unification that would mean strictly removing or suppressing existing and used terms and forcibly introducing different ones. The first stage of its work (2004-2005) was concerned only with analysing the current conventional wisdom, i.e. adopting, by-and-large, a descriptive approach. First the members of the group, through e-mail discussion and at group meetings, put together a relatively small group

(approximately 80 items) of key onomastic terms (i.e. those whose usage is not restricted to only a few languages or onomastic schools and that do not have too narrow or specific meanings) in English, adding their definitions and specific examples of their usage. During meetings at an international onomastic symposium in Zadar (September 2004) a selection of entries and definitions of terms were also discussed with other experts – onomasticians from Croatia, Russia, Finland, Latvia, Italy and South Africa, whose views provided a major contribution to the overall draft form of the dictionary. The intention was to incorporate the definitions and examples that would be understandable to both professionals and laymen, though an additional objective of the working group was to identify the differences between the various existing definitions. Another meeting of the terminological group was held within the ICOS Board of Directors in Brighton (1<sup>st</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2005), at which individual terms, their definitions and examples of their usage were again discussed in detail. The result of this work – a three-language version of the basic list of onomastic terms in the official languages of the ICOS (English, German and French) – was introduced at the 22<sup>nd</sup> International Congress of Onomastic Sciences in Pisa (28<sup>th</sup> August to 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2005).

In the years 2005-2008 work on establishing the basic list of onomastic terms continued based on the opinions of the members of the terminological group and of the ICOS Board of Directors. During the same period M. Harvalík and E. Caffarelli organised an international survey of onomastic terminology. It was attended by almost 40 leading onomasticians from around the world and their responses were published in the Italian onomastic journal *Rivista Italiana di Onomastica* (Harvalík, Caffarelli [eds.], 2007). These survey results were taken into account in the ongoing work of the terminological group.

An additional important stimulus was the co-operation with the UNGEGN Working Group on Terminology. Based on an initiative by its leader, Staffan Nyström, a meeting was held during the 23<sup>rd</sup> International Congress of Onomastic Sciences in Toronto between the representatives of the terminological working groups (18<sup>th</sup> August 2008). One result of this meeting was the establishment of a joint terminological committee which consists of three representatives of the ICOS Terminology Group (Richard Coates, Milan Harvalík and Mats Wahlberg) and three representatives of the UNGEGN Working Group on Terminology (Isolde Hausner, Andre Lapierre and Staffan Nyström).

The history and the preliminary results of the work of the ICOS Terminology Group, in addition to other work plans, were introduced to the participants at the General Session of the ICOS at the congress in Toronto.

Another important meeting, by now under the leadership of J. Kuhn, also took place in Vienna in December 2010. The members of the group present there supplemented the basic list of key onomastic terms and updated their definitions in accordance with the responses that they had received during the interim period. The meeting in Vienna was followed by the meeting in Uppsala (April 2011) and a meeting via Skype (August 2011), during which the list was prepared in the form that is to be presented at the 24<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Onomastic Sciences in Barcelona.

Most of the terms are associated with individual classes and types of proper names (e.g. *personal name*, *exonym*, *hodonym*). The concepts related specifically to the theory and methodology of onomastics deserve particular attention in the future, even though it can be expected that there will be the greatest differences between the usage of certain terms in the different languages and onomastic schools.<sup>1</sup> There has also been a strong demand to focus in greater detail on the terms of literary onomastics. In regard to the most-widespread potential accessibility of the glossary it would also be useful to create versions for other languages.

<sup>1</sup> An example of the ambivalence and lack of clarity of onomastic terminology is the use of the term *function* – R. Šrámek (1999, 22) counted 36 onomastic terms employing that expression.

The resulting glossary will serve as a guidebook for simpler orientation in national onomastic terminologies and will also constitute the basis for the next phase of the work of the terminological group, through which it will be possible, based on the analyses of individual terms and their definitions, to proceed with prescribing or to more precise recommendations of which terms to use and how they should be understood. In assessing the appropriateness of the terms used it is necessary to take into account several factors, about the relative importance of which there is a general consensus amongst onomasticians (cf. Svoboda, 1961, 323-324; Witkowski, 1995, 293).

Because onomastics, by its nature, belongs amongst the linguistic disciplines, onomastic terms must also be in correlation with linguistic terms. Given the interdisciplinary nature of onomastics and its close relationship with other disciplines it is also necessary that onomastic terms should be used (or at least accepted) by representatives of non-linguistic disciplines, especially geographers, cartographers and historians.

Basic terms of foreign origin should be used in all languages with the same level of validity. For the sake of greater clarity it appears appropriate to have international terms available for the main concepts and phenomena, despite the fact that there are also domestic terms. International terms and their domestic equivalents must be used with exactly the same meanings (e.g. *Tiername*, *Zoonym*).

Through gradual development full correspondence should be achieved between the national terms that indicate the same phenomenon in different languages (e.g. *Verleihung*, *bestowal*, *dation d'un nom*) while striving to avoid ambiguity or the use of the same terms – once with a wider signification and the second time with a narrower signification.

The use of synonymous terms (unless it is a national and international doublet, e.g. *Raumname*, *Choronym*) should be reduced gradually.

In connection with the competition between domestic and international onomastic terms it should be noted that the point of view of onomasticians concerning this subject is not uniform (cf. Harvalík, 2003). T. Witkowski (1995, 288) argues that the usage of international terms is a must for every discipline and therefore also for onomasticians and rejects the opinion that either internationalisms will not be understood by laypeople and the representatives of other disciplines or that they will not accept them. He concedes the use of domestic terms in works of a popular character. In contrast, Z. Kaleta (1998, 78) does not recommend replacing domestic terms with foreign terms, due to the fact that the domestic ones are more understandable, and states that national terms are also in more common use in Western Europe. In her opinion new terms of foreign origin should be accepted only if there are related terms in the language, the meaning of which is generally familiar; for example in Polish *kosmonim* which the language user can connect to the appellatives *kosmos* and *kosmonauta* or *zoonim*, related to the conventionally known expressions *zoologia* and *zoo*. If there are no related expressions in the language, it is better not to introduce foreign terms, or to put them in second place following the domestic term.

The solution to this problem is an approach utilising the functional aspect, on the basis of which the choice of a domestic or an international term is governed by the recipient for whom the text is intended. If the forms are fully equivalent it is optimal to state both forms of the term at the point of its first occurrence in a text that is not intended only for onomasticians. This allows for the alternating of synonymous terms in a text, which contributes to its higher stylistic level while not interfering with terminological clarity. The parallel functioning of two terms then also comfortably acquaints readers with the less well-known member of a terminological pair, which subsequently simplifies the reading of such professionally conceived texts in which internationalisms are prevalent.

Practice shows that it is not necessary or even appropriate to introduce internationalisms in all cases, especially in marginal groups of proper names. The requirement not to overload

the terminology with specific names for every kind of object appears to be mandatory (cf. *Osnoven sistem i terminologija na slovenskata onomastika* 1983: 9). For those groups of proper names that are the primary focus of onomastic research, internationalisms are in order, while on the other hand one can argue the merits of the creation and use of certain specific (peripheral) terms of foreign origin (however comprehensible they may be), such as *rheitronym*, a proper name of a stream, *krenonym*, a proper name of a spring, and *hipponym*, a proper name of a horse.

A study of onomastic works during recent years confirms that the systematic and critical monitoring of onomastic terminology represents one of the most topical challenges. We can conclude that mutual coordination between the terms used in different languages and onomastic schools, always taking into account their existing usage and with respect for the right of pluralism, can substantially contribute to an improved understanding of the knowledge obtained by individual researchers in their study of proper names and thereby stimulate further development of the principles of the general theory of onomastics.

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