

The terminological work of UNGEGN and ICOS – a presentation and a comparison

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Abstract

In this paper I discuss the results of the work done so far by the UNGEGN working group on toponymic terminology, presented in the printed *Glossary of Terms for the Standardization of Geographical Names* (2002) and later supplemented by an *Addendum* (2007) published on the UNGEGN website. I compare this glossary to a newly released *List of Key Onomastic Terms* (2011) elaborated by the terminological group within The International Council of Onomastic Sciences (ICOS). What are the similarities and differences? Do we really need two globally working terminological groups and two term lists at all? My answer is yes we do, above all because the two lists serve different purposes. In the paper I highlight a few toponymic terms in particular just to illustrate the problems and difficulties connected to the efforts of finding a globally harmonized toponomastic terminology.

The United Nations has been engaged in the standardization of geographical names since the 1960s, mainly through its expert body called the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names or shorter UNGEGN. UNGEGN is one of several expert bodies under the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). In connection with the work on names carried out by the United Nations the term used is in most cases *geographical names* but in the daily work there is actually no real difference in meaning from the term *place names*, which most onomasticians are more used to. *Standardization* is the word used for activities that in other situations might be called *name care*, *name treatment* or *name planning*.

International standardization is based on national standardization. In every country a competent authority, with the formal right to do so, shall handle the national standardization of place names and the establishment of the official spelling and denotation of the names. Accordingly, UNGEGN's mandate is to act as an advisory body with the task of promoting work with geographical names, both nationally and internationally. The group comprises experts from 23 linguistic/geographic divisions to which the countries belong. Sweden – just to take an example – belongs to the Norden Division together with Denmark and Greenland, Finland, Iceland and Norway. In addition to the work done within the divisions so called working groups can be formed for special individual tasks. Anyone of the experts can join a working group or leave a working group when it pleases him or her. Right now there are 10 working groups more or less in function. I am the convenor of the working group on toponymic terminology since 2007 when prof. Naftali Kadmon from Israel stepped down after having initiated it and chaired it for 18 years.

Background

The working group on toponymic terminology was set up by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names at its 15th session in Geneva in May 1989. The main tasks of the group were to produce a new glossary of toponymic terminology, and to periodically review and update the glossary. The first task was achieved in 2002 when the *Glossary of Terms for the Standardization of Geographical Names* was published. It includes 375 entries, i.e. terms and their definitions, in the six official UN languages in one combined volume with appropriate cross-

referencing. The UN languages are Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish. Today the glossary exists – more or less completely – also in other languages, e.g. German, Portuguese and Swedish. In the following presentation I use the English version only.

In resolution VIII/3 (Berlin, 2002) the Eighth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names (UNCSGN) recognized that “terminology is not at a standstill, and that future developments will require additions and/or amendments to the definitions of terms” and recommended that the working group on toponymic terminology continue to function. At the ninth conference in New York (2007) a total of 23 entries were approved for insertion in the glossary. 12 of these were terms whose definitions had been amended, and the other 11 were additional terms not included in the 2002 glossary at all.

Both the glossary and the addendum are now posted on the UNGEGN website. <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEgn/default.html>.

Besides UNGEGN there is another international terminology group producing a list of terms, namely the terminology group of ICOS (The International Council of Onomastic Sciences). Some years ago a joint group was formed on my initiative to ensure that experience and information are transferred between these globally working terminology groups. During a meeting in Toronto 2008 the joint group decided that a comparison be made between the two terminology lists of UNGEGN and ICOS in order to pinpoint any interesting discrepancies between them. I presented the first and preliminary results of such a comparison at the 25th UNGEGN session in Nairobi, Kenya, in May 2009.

The 2009 comparison

As mentioned above the UNGEGN glossary was first published in 2002, as the result of many years of discussions and preparation. The ICOS group – on the other hand – was initiated by Milan Harvalík that very same year at the ICOS congress in Uppsala, Sweden, and a terminology group within ICOS has been working on and off since then. The ICOS “List of Key Onomastic Terms” is still preliminary, and it was even more so when I first compared the lists in 2009. The ICOS list is a living document that is meant to grow in different ways during the next few years, and it is also meant to be revised on a continuous basis.

At the moment (September 2011) the UNGEGN glossary has 386 entries (with individual numbers) including the 11 new terms presented in the addendum dating from November 2007. Of these approximately 140 are cross-references of some kind. Very common – more than half of these – are double entries like:

082	extraterrestrial feature	<i>See</i> feature, extraterrestrial.
088	feature, extraterrestrial	A → topographic feature on any planet other than Earth, or on a satellite. <i>Example</i> : a crater on the moon

This gives two entries (082 and 088) but only one definition. Quite a few are also the synonyms with one common definition, like:

086	feature name	<i>See</i> toponym
339	toponym	Proper noun applied to a → topographic feature . Comprehensive term for → geographical names and → extraterrestrial names .

Again we have more entries than really defined terms, which means – in fact – that there are not 386 but around 310 unique terms with approximately 245 different definitions in the UNGEGN glossary. That is still a high number if we compare it with the ICOS list which had 73 entries in 2009 when I made the first comparison. Today there are 70, out of which 19 are only cross-references to another “synonymous” term with the same definition, like these two examples:

animal name – see **zonym**
or
Christian name – see **first name**

Of these 70 entries only 19 are found in the UNGEGN glossary as well, which means that the main part, 51 terms, are not used in the UNGEGN glossary at all, so no comparison can be made. However, this is not as strange as it might sound at first. The ICOS list covers a wider range of onomastics and thereby includes terms connected to other name categories than place names, e.g. personal names, brand names, and names of animals. This explains why terms like *by-name*, *first name*, *hagionym*, *nickname*, *pseudonym*, and *zonym* are included by ICOS but not by UNGEGN.

At the same time the ICOS list in some cases uses – as entries – a more complete group of terms, linguistically related or closely connected to each other. This means, for instance, that while the UNGEGN glossary has only the term *onomastics*, the ICOS list also includes *onomastician*, *onomasticon*, *onym*, *onymisation*, and *onymy*.

On the other hand, many terms in the UNGEGN glossary are not used for onomastic matters in the first place, which explains why they are of less interest to ICOS. Some terms reflect a geographical perspective rather than a linguistic, and terms like *batch processing*, *computer program*, *coded representation*, *donor script*, *file format*, *map script*, *rectangular coordinates*, *reversability*, and *UTM grid* are of a more technical nature and will probably never be used in the ICOS “List of Key Onomastic Terms”. And perhaps they should not have been included in the UNGEGN glossary either, if the glossary had been elaborated today. We must bear in mind that the work on the UNGEGN glossary started more than 20 years ago.

But, as I mentioned, 19 terms are now shared by the two lists. They are: *allonym*, *anthroponym*, *choronym*, *endonym*, *eponym*, *ethnonym*, *exonym*, *geographical name*, *hodonym*, *hydronym*, *name*, *odonym*, *onomastics*, *oronym*, *place name*, *proper name*, *toponomastics*, *toponym* and *toponymy*. The definitions are in some cases identical, in other cases they differ only in details. Since the UNGEGN glossary already exists, the ICOS terminology group has had the possibility to start from that and to consider if the definitions used there are acceptable. If they are, there is of course no need to make a new one.

Occasionally the definitions indicate that further discussions are needed within both groups and between the groups, and perhaps some changes and amendments in the UNGEGN glossary will be necessary as well. Many terms have been discussed lately by the UNGEGN working group but no changes have been formally decided since I took over as convenor of the group in 2007. There are for instance some important terms in the ICOS list that are not found in the UNGEGN glossary, but maybe ought to be inserted there. Terms like *field name*, *microtoponym*, and *settlement name* are perhaps a bit tricky to define but they are useful. Good definitions are needed since the phenomena they cover are often treated by geographers, cartographers and onomasticians.

Further examples

Before I show some more examples I just want to emphasize that the UNGEGN working group on toponymic terminology in accordance with resolution VIII/3 have continued to discuss the approved and published terms in the glossary as well as further amendments and additions. We also have initiated a process for creating a database from the existing records of the UNGEGN glossary (2002) and its addendum (2007). If – or rather when – the suggested database is realized, the glossary will be more flexible; additions and amendments will be much easier to handle, and cross-references and comparisons between the language versions will be quicker. A prototype –an embryo– of such a database do exist in Copenhagen, so far handled by Peder Gammeltoft, the present chairman of the Norden Division. We will continue to work on that database.

Sometimes the differences between the two lists are marginal, perhaps only a matter of stylistics or some extra examples added, like the term *choronym* (cf. name–proper name; large–larger):

choronym

UNGEKN Addendum Name of a large geographical or administrative unit of land. *Examples:* Yorkshire; Ar-Rub'; al-Khāli; Misiones; Attiki.

ICOS: Proper name of a larger geographical or administrative unit of land – e.g. *Africa, Sibir' (Siberia), Suomi, Dalmacija, Toscana, Bretagne, Steiermark, Castilla, La Mancha.* (NOTE: In some languages the term **macrotoponym** is used for an inhabited large area).

Sometimes the differences are bigger, for instance when there are two alternative terms, like *hodonym–odonym*, and priority is not given to the same one. UNGEGN uses the term *hodonym* as entry number 129 but refers to the *h*-less form *odonym*, while ICOS under *hodonym* gives a complete definition: ‘route name ...’ etc. with examples.

hodonym

UNGEKN: *See odonym.*

ICOS: Route proper name (i.e. proper name of a street, square, motorway, country road, path, tunnel, ford, bridge, footbridge, railway line etc.) – e.g. *Portobello Road, Eurotunnel, Via Baltica, Marktgasse, D1.*

Under entry 247 *odonym* – on the other hand – UNGEGN gives a definition with examples, while ICOS from **odonym* refers to *hodonym* and also puts an asterisk on the entry, which means that this form is not recommendable.

odonym

UNGEKN: →**Proper noun** of a traffic route feature. *Examples:* Via Appia (historical road); Airway Amber (air traffic route); M4 (motorway); Fleet Street; Piccadilly Circus; Darb ar-Hajj (pilgrim’s route).

ICOS: See **hodonym**

In some cases it is obvious that the scientific perspectives are different: the ICOS list defines the onomastic or linguistic term while the UNGEGN glossary instead defines the topographic object. See for instance how *hydronym* is treated:

From *hydronym* UNGEGN refers both to *toponym* and to *hydrographic feature* but no definition of the term is given here. Under *hydrographic feature* there is yet another reference

to *feature, hydrographic* where a definition of the object, not of the term, is found. ICOS on the other hand defines the onomastic term. It looks like this:

hydronym

UNGEGN:

132 hydronym
131 hydrographic feature
090 feature, hydrographic

→ **Toponym** applied to a → **hydrographic feature**.

See feature, hydrographic.

→ **Topographic feature** consisting of water, or associated mainly with water but not consisting of dry land. *Examples*: lake; underground reservoir; but not an island.

ICOS:

Name of a body of water (i.e. name of a sea, bay, strait, lake, swamp, fishpond, storage lake, spring, well, river, brook, waterfall etc.) – e.g. *Atlantic Ocean, Ostsee, Golf du Lion, Lake Superior, Huang He, Niagara Falls*

A difference in perspective can also be seen in the term *oronym* where the definitions are slightly different. ICOS gives a comment in a note:

oronym

UNGEGN Addendum:

Name of a vertically structured formation of the terrain (including the sea bed), for example, names of mountains, mountain ranges, sea mounts, hills or highlands. *Examples*: Matterhorn; Gaurīśankar; Fuji San; Sierra Madre; Mid-Atlantic Ridge.

ICOS:

Proper name of an elevated formation of the terrain (i.e. name of a mountain, mountain range, highland, upland, hill, rock etc.) – *Aconcagua, Elbrus, Rocky Mountains, die Alpen*. (NOTE: By geographers the term oronym is sometimes used in a broader sense and includes also proper names of valleys, lowlands etc.)

This notion (in the note) that “vertically structured” also can include valleys, ravines and the like is not actually mentioned in the approved definition in the UNGEGN glossary. It emanates from discussions we have had for instance within the UNGEGN working group.

The basic terms *name* and *toponymy*

A few differences can be seen also in the very basic terms we use; let me start with the term *name*. It looks like this:

UNGEGN:

209 name
246 noun, proper

(a) *See* noun, proper.

(b) In the specific context of this glossary: a → **toponym**

A word that uniquely identifies an individual person, place or thing. *Examples*: Albert, Beijing, Budapest.

ICOS:

name – see **proper name**
proper name

Linguistic expression that uniquely identifies a person, a group of persons, a place, an animal or an object (ship, train ...) – e.g. *Earth, Zambezi, Chile, Beijing, David, Victoria, Miikulainen, Hyundai, Sony, das Erzgebirge*.

UNGEGN refers from the entry *name* to the entry *noun, proper* where we find the definition “a word that uniquely identifies ...etc.”. Taking into account the long debate about the

difference, the borderline, between a word and a name ICOS have chosen not to use the word “word” in the definition, but instead “linguistic expression that uniquely identifies ...”.

Worth mentioning here is also the fact that a “linguistic expression that uniquely identifies a group of persons” is included in the ICOS definition, even though not everyone would consider i.e. *Germans* or *Spaniards* as proper names at all.

The term *toponymy* is interesting. The UNGEGN glossary gives two different meanings to the term, namely (a) and (b) below. The ICOS list on the other hand mentions only the last one, the (b)-definition. It even repudiates the (a)-definition in a NOTE saying “not recommended”. This is how it looks:

UNGEKN:	
344	toponymy
	(a) The science that has as its object the study of → toponyms in general and of → geographical names in particular.
	(b) The totality of → toponyms in a given region.
ICOS:	
	The set of toponyms within a specific territory/region, language, period of time etc. (NOTE: sometimes also used for a branch of onomastics scholarly studying toponyms which is not recommended).

Consequently the term *toponomastics* is treated quite differently in the two lists.

UNGEKN:	
338	toponomastics
	The activity or process of conferring → toponyms .
ICOS:	
	Branch of onomastics studying toponyms in a scholarly way (NOTE: sometimes also called toponymy which is not recommended in this sense)

According to the ICOS definition *toponomastics* is a parallel and a subordinate term to *onomastics*, just as *anthroponomastics* is.

One might think that an easy way to bring these two lists closer to each other would be if UNGEGN started using the term *toponomastics* for the branch of onomastics dealing with place names (just as ICOS does) and saved the term *toponymy* for the meaning ‘a set of toponyms’ like in the phrase “the toponymy of Sweden is well documented” etc. But there is a long tradition within UNGEGN of using *toponymy* also as a word for the activity of dealing with place names in different ways. For instance UNGEGN, through one of its working groups, have organized very successful “Training Courses in Toponymy” throughout the world. The working group dealing with these matters is even called The Working Group on Training Courses in Toponymy.

So perhaps it is not possible to completely harmonize the two terminology lists. But of course we have to keep trying to bring them closer to each other. After all, it must be better, it must be clearer and safer from a communicative point of view, if we all understand and use the basic terms in the same way.

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