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The joint IGU/ICA Commission/Working Group on Toponymy. A short introduction

*Peter Jordan**

1. Was there a need for an additional toponymic forum?

Toponymy, the science of place names, geographical names or toponyms is in one sense a sub-discipline of onomastics, the science of proper names in general, and rather visible within this frame. In another sense it can also be regarded as a sub-discipline of geography, where it is, however, much less visible so far. Of course, toponymy may equally well be regarded as a science in its own right, located at the intersection of several acknowledged disciplines: notably linguistics, geography and cartography, but also historical, cultural and juridical research.

The location of toponymy at the intersection of better-known disciplines has resulted in the subject enjoying only a low level of academic institutionalisation. There are very few university chairs devoted exclusively to this field, and dedicated academy institutes and the like are rare. Toponymy is at present usually pursued by academics as a sideline alongside their main role in one of the established sciences.

Yet this lack of academic institutionalisation is not a valid indicator of the vital importance of place names. Toponyms are symbols, like flags and coats of arms, and as part of the intangible cultural heritage they possess – in addition to their more practical functions of identification and orientation – also a political significance. At the symbolic level they can often represent conflicts with deep roots in society.

The United Nations recognised the significance of geographical names standardization as early as 1960, when it established an expert group in this field (the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, UNGEGN) – one of just six active permanent expert United Nations groups. Many countries have also recognised the subject's significance by establishing national or regional boards on geographical names. Within the International Council of Onomastic Sciences (ICOS), too, toponymy is attracting increasing interest, as indeed it is within the basic disciplines involved in onomastic research, especially linguistics, cartography and geography.

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It is certainly an advantage of UNGEGN and ICOS to be organized in multidisciplinary way and to facilitate in this way interdisciplinary discussions and work. But it also makes sense to establish toponymic fora within the International Geographical Union (IGU) as well as the International Cartographic Association (ICA) to encourage engagement of geographers and cartographers, resp., in this field.

Geographers are able to contribute a lot to research into questions like the role of place names for space-related identity building or as mediators between man and place. For cartographers certainly the role and function of place names on maps is in the focus of research interests. But it is also important to raise the awareness of the meaning of place names and to further disseminate scientific methods of place-names representation on maps among cartographers. For UNGEGN, a.o., the question of identifying and naming features in different cultural contexts is important and can be answered by cartographers and geographers. Thus, a toponymic forum within IGU and ICA certainly creates an added value compared to the already existing fora of UNGEGN and ICOS.

2. How the joint Commission/Working Group came into being

At the occasion of the 26th UNGEGN Session in Vienna [Wien], 2-6 May 2011, a group of cartographers and geographers including Helen KERFOOT, at that time UNGEGN Chair, and Georg Gartner, at that time ICA Vice-Chair and later ICA Chair, met to discuss this question. The group considered the establishment of a joint IGU/ICA Commission on Toponymy. A next meeting of interested persons at the 25th International Cartographic Conference in Paris, 3-8 July 2011, followed.

A joint IGU/ICA Commission/Working Group on Toponymy has then actually been established at the IGU Regional Geographic Conference in Santiago (Chile), 14-18 November 2011 (see Figure), and has subsequently been approved by the relevant ICA bodies. Besides creating a network of toponymists with a cartographic or geographic background and approach its main task is to foster toponymic research in cartography and geography complementary to UNGEGN with its main orientation towards standardization and ICOS with its predominantly linguistic approach.

This new platform has so far the status of a Working Group on the ICA side with Paulo De Menezes (Brazil) as the chair and is from the very beginning a commission on the IGU side with Cosimo Palagiano (Italy) as his IGU counterpart. Sungjae Choo (Republic of Korea), Yaïves Ferland (Canada), Peter Jordan (Austria), Ferjan Ormeling (Netherlands), Peter Raper (South Africa) and Kohei Watanabe (Japan) function as steering board and full members. Corresponding membership is open to everybody interested.

3. *A research agenda in toponymy for cartographers and geographers*

A possible research agenda for cartographers and geographers regarding place names may be outlined in the following way:

- *Functions of place names on maps*: e.g. Do they identify places or just explain them?
- *Rendering of place names on maps*: e.g. When to use endonyms, when exonyms? Script conversion. Which features are to be named?
- *Names placement on maps*: e.g. Selection principles, when space is rare? Needs every map feature to be named? Does lettering distort content density perception?
- *Principles for creating new place names*: e.g. with commercial naming, street names, commemorative naming in general.
- *Place names as expression of time- or space-related identity*: e.g. Why do they have this function? What do they indicate? What do they mean for non-dominant groups? What does this mean for legal regulations? What is the meaning of the endonym/exonym divide in this context?
- *Place name/feature relation*: e.g. Up to where has a name endonym status? Can sea names be endonyms?
- *Motives for place naming*: e.g. Cultural background of the name-giving community? Synchronic and diachronic diversity of motives? What do place names tell us about name-giving communities? Transparent and opaque names. Motives of our times: commercialisation versus preservation of the cultural heritage. Place-names changes and their driving forces?
- *Place names and administration*: e.g. Administrative competences for place names? Street names as a case in point. Street naming in multilingual urban quarters. Naming when administrative units (municipalities, districts) are merged. Treatment of place names of non-dominant and indigenous groups. Place-names boards and committees of all administrative levels and their responsibilities.
- *Place names and transportation*: e.g. Naming on road signposts, naming in the railway system, naming in air transportation.
- *Place-name conflicts*: e.g. What do place-name conflicts indicate? Backgrounds and reasons of current conflicts. Best-practice in solving place-name conflicts.

4. *What the Commission/Working Group so far did*

During its still short history of not even two years this young Commission/Working Group has already set a number of activities.

- *32nd International Geographical Congress, Cologne [Köln], Germany, 26-30 August 2012*: Four toponymic sessions titled "Place names as

markers and ingredients of space-related identity 1-4” with a total of 15 papers had been locally organized by Peter Jordan (Austria).

- JORDAN P. and ORMELING F. (eds.) (2013), *Toponyms in Cartography*. Proceedings of the Toponymic Sessions at the 25th International Cartographic Conference, Paris, 3-8 July 2011 (= Name & Place, 2). Hamburg, Verlag Dr. Kovač.
- *IGU Regional Conference, Kyoto, Japan, 4-9 August 2013*: Four sessions on geographical approaches to toponymy with a total of 15 papers had been locally organized by Kohei Watanabe (Japan).
- *Seminar “Historical maps, atlas maps, and toponymy”, Leipzig, Germany, 21-23 August 2013*: As a pre-conference event of ICC Dresden three ICA commissions/working groups, i.e. the ICA Commission on the History of Cartography (chair: Elri Liebenberg, South Africa), the ICA Commission on Atlases (chair: Peter Jordan, Austria) and the IGU/ICA Commission/Working Group on Toponymy (chair: Paulo De Menezes, Brazil) in co-operation with the Leibniz Institute of Regional Research [Leibniz Institut für Länderkunde, IfL] Leipzig, met in the facilities of this Institute in Leipzig. The seminar saw 40 registered participants and 17 paper presentations with a lot of fruitful interdisciplinary discussion. The proceedings will be published open access by the host institute as a volume of its book series “forum IfL”.
- *26th International Cartographic Conference (ICC), Dresden, Germany, 26-30 August 2013*: In two sessions organized by the Commission/WG in total six papers on toponymy were presented.
- *EuGeo Congress, Rome [Roma], 5-7 September 2013*: In a panel on toponyms organized by Cosimo Palagiano (Italy) five papers were presented.

Plannings for the year 2014 comprise toponymic sessions in the framework of the next IGU Regional Geographic Conference in Cracow [Kraków], 18-22 August 2014, and a workshop on place-names changes in Rome in November 2014.

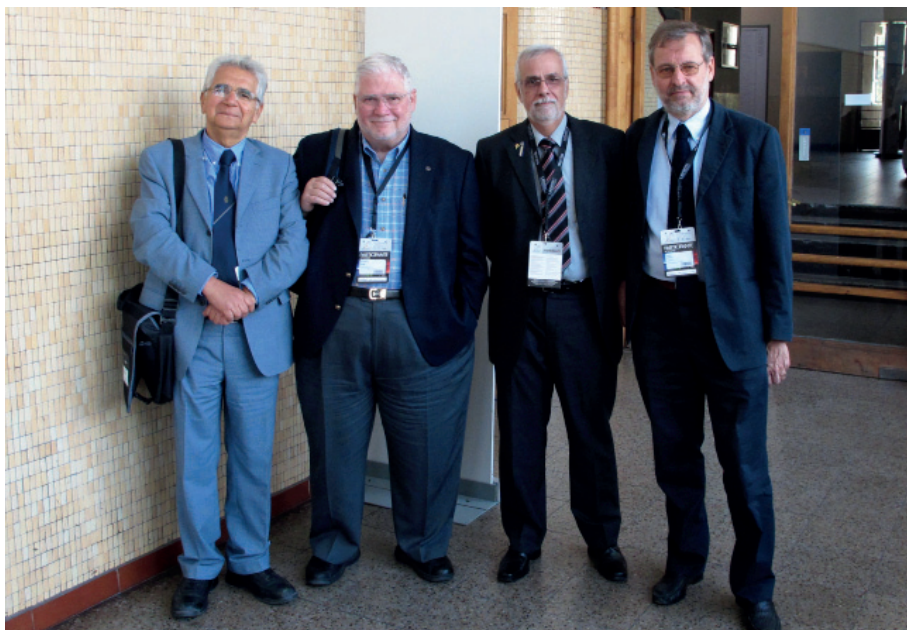


Fig. 1 – The “founding fathers” of the joint IGU/ICA Commission/Working Group after their meeting at the IGU Regional Geographic Conference in Santiago (Chile), 14-18 November 2011; from left to right: Cosimo Palagiano (IGU Chair of the Commission), Ron Abler (at that time IGU Chair), Paulo De Menezes (ICA Chair of the WG), Peter Jordan (Steering Board member).