

Exonyms as parts of the cultural heritage

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Abstract: The article departs from the assumption that exonyms in the sense of place names not used by the local community and differing from the respective endonym are parts of the cultural heritage and deserve for this very reason to be protected, documented, and kept in use. Why they are parts of the cultural heritage is explained by four arguments: because they are elements of a language, and language is without any doubt part of the cultural heritage; because they reflect the pattern of a community's network of external political, cultural and economic relations; because they relate a community with its history; because they are in the user community often reflected and repeated by street names, names of dishes, pieces of music or theatre plays etc., where they actually assume the status of endonyms and form the nucleus of a name system. Since appreciating place names as a part of the cultural heritage is a rather recent current in the context of international and national place-name

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standardization, resolutions of the United Nations as well as national regulations have so far not adequately reacted to it – a fact that is also highlighted.

Keywords: Place names, exonyms, cultural relations, historiography, ergonyms.

Les exonymes comme éléments du patrimoine culturel

Résumé : L'article part de l'hypothèse que les exonymes au sens de noms de lieux non utilisés par la communauté locale et différents de l'endonyme respectif font partie du patrimoine culturel et méritent pour cette raison d'être protégés, documentés et maintenus en usage. Leur appartenance au patrimoine culturel s'explique par quatre arguments: car ce sont des éléments d'une langue, et la langue fait sans aucun doute partie du patrimoine culturel; parce qu'ils reflètent le modèle du réseau de relations externes politiques, culturelles et économiques d'une communauté; parce qu'ils relient une communauté à son histoire; parce qu'ils sont dans la communauté des utilisateurs souvent reflétés et répétés par des noms de rue, des noms de plats, des morceaux de musique ou de pièces de théâtre, etc., où ils assument en fait le statut d'endonymes et forment le noyau d'un système de noms. Étant donné que l'appréciation des noms de lieux comme faisant partie du patrimoine culturel est un courant assez récent dans le contexte de la normalisation internationale et nationale des noms de lieux, les résolutions des Nations Unies ainsi que les réglementations nationales n'y ont jusqu'à présent pas réagi de manière adéquate – un fait qui est également mis en évidence.

Mots-clés : Toponymes, exonymes, relations culturelles, historiographie, ergonymes.

Exonyme als Teil des kulturellen Erbes

Zusammenfassung: Der Artikel geht von der Annahme aus, dass Exonyme im Sinne von geographischen Namen, die nicht von der örtlichen Gemeinschaft verwendet werden und sich vom jeweiligen Endonym unterscheiden, Teil des kulturellen Erbes sind und eben deshalb geschützt, dokumentiert und in Gebrauch gehalten werden sollten. Warum sie Teil des kulturellen Erbes sind, wird durch vier Argumente erklärt: weil sie Elemente einer Sprache sind und Sprache ohne Zweifel Teil des kulturellen Erbes ist; weil sie das Netzwerk externer politischer, kultureller und wirtschaftlicher Beziehungen einer Gemeinschaft widerspiegeln; weil sie eine Gemeinschaft mit ihrer Geschichte verbinden; weil sie sich in der Nutzergemeinschaft oft als Straßennamen, Namen von Speisen und Getränken, Musikstücken oder Theaterstücken etc. wiederfinden, womit sie sogar die Qualität von Endonymen annehmen und den Nukleus eines Namenssystems bilden. Da die Anerkennung von geographischen Namen als Teil des kulturellen Erbes im Bereich der internationalen und nationalen Standardisierung geographischer Namen eine jüngere Strömung ist, haben Resolutionen der Vereinten Nationen sowie nationale Regelungen bisher nicht angemessen darauf reagiert – eine Tatsache, die in diesem Artikel ebenfalls angesprochen wird.

Schlüsselbegriffe: geographische Namen, Exonyme, Kulturbeziehungen, Historiographie, Ergonyme.

1. Introduction

Exonyms in the sense of place names not used by the local community and differing from the respective endonym (as the place name used and accepted by the local community)¹ are certainly parts of the cultural heritage insofar as they are elements of a language and language is a vital part of the cultural heritage. By the way we speak we define ourselves and are defined by others.

But calling exonyms parts of the cultural heritage has also some more justification. They have been created due to intensive relations of the receiver community with the feature denoted by the exonym by translation of the endonym, by its morphological or orthographic adaption to the receiver language, sometimes also by defining a new word. A feature frequently addressed in a given community due to its importance for the community is named by an exonym, because the exonym in orthography corresponding to the receiver language is easier to be pronounced and memorized. The pattern of exonyms used by a certain community thus reflects the network of its historical and current external political, cultural and economic relations (see [Jordan 2009, 2020](#)).

Another justification of attributing exonyms the quality of being part of the cultural heritage is that they relate a community with its history. In historical treatises places are always addressed by names in the community's

¹ This definition of the exonym was developed by the Working Group on Exonyms of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) in intensive discussions between 2007 and 2014 (see [Jordan et al. 2011](#); [Jordan & Woodman 2014, 2015](#)), but never elevated to the status of an official UNGEGN Glossary definition due to a politically motivated veto. Thus, the UNGEGN Glossary definition of 2007 was not modified or replaced and runs as follows ([UNGEGN 2022a: 279](#)):

Exonym: Name used in a specific language for a geographical feature situated outside the area where that language is widely spoken and differing in its form from the respective endonym(s) in the area where the geographical feature is situated. Examples: *Warsaw* is the English exonym for *Warszawa* (Polish); *Mailand* is German for *Milano*; *Londres* is French for *London*; *Kūlūniyā* is Arabic for *Köln*. The officially romanized endonym *Moskva* for *Москва* is not an exonym, nor is the Pinyin form *Beijing*, while *Peking* is an exonym. The United Nations recommends minimizing the use of exonyms in international usage. See also name, traditional.

The [International Council of Onomastic Sciences \(ICOS\)](#) in its [List of Key Onomastic Terms](#) presents the following definition ([ICOS 2022: 2](#)):

Exonym: Name used in a specific language for a geographical feature situated outside the area where that language is widely spoken and differing in its form from the name used in the area where the geographical feature is situated – e.g., French *Londres* for *London*, German *Warschau* for *Warszawa*, *Bangkok* for *Krung Thep*, Spanish *Ginebra* for *Genève*.

own language, may they have been endonyms in older periods and only by change of political or demographic circumstances in the place denoted by them later have turned into exonyms or have always been used as conventional names in a community's historiographic literature.

A fourth justification may be seen in the fact that exonyms play an important role not only in urban names like as the specific component of street names, where they assume the status of endonyms in the toponymic sense, but also as specific components of ergonyms like names of dishes, pieces of music or theatre plays also there assuming the status of endonyms, but in the wider onomastic sense.

Let us now explain these four justifications and illustrate them by examples.

2. Four reasons for regarding exonyms as part of the cultural heritage

2.1. Exonyms are elements of a language

When we understand culture in the most comprehensive sense as a system of norms, by which human communities differ from each other, language is a most essential part of it. Every language reflects a system of concepts that characterizes a specific culture and makes a group of people, a community, looking at least slightly different from others at our world, i.e., at complex reality. People speaking the same language have roughly the same system of concepts, which makes living in a community much easier. And this same system of concepts could develop because they were able to communicate about it in the same language.

Language has thus very suitable capacities for community building and therefore also as identity marker of group identities. Language includes individuals into a community and excludes others at the same time (see [Jeleń et al. 2002](#); [Jordan 2019a](#); [Kamusella 2009, 2012](#); [Panagl et al. 2001](#); [Scharnhorst 1995](#); [Segrott 2001](#); [Seipel 2003](#); [Trudgill 1983](#)).

Another factor that makes language including individuals into a community and has a less including effect on others is closeness. Closeness can be generated by special words for a concept or by the specific pronunciation or intonation of given words. Families, partners or parents and children, for example, like to create special words not understandable to others for some concepts and develop in a way a "secret language" (see [Jordan 2019a](#)).

There are also subgroups in a wider community or society using specific words and developing a specific language variant such as the younger generation, workers, fans of sport clubs, hunters, fishermen, prostitutes, and criminals (see [Girtler 1996](#)). These variations separate an in-group knowing and using these keywords from outsiders. "He speaks like we speak" has the same meaning as "He is one of us".

Exonyms are elements of a language owing all the characteristics mentioned before. Who uses an exonym, is part of the group acquainted with the set of exonyms specifically used by this (sub-)group. Who addresses a small village beyond the language boundary by the exonym in local use on his/her side of the boundary, identifies himself/herself as an insider and generates a feeling of closeness with his/her conversation partner – like it is, when they speak the same local dialect.

2.2. Exonyms reflect the network of a community's external relations

It is supported by several studies that exonyms have been formed and maintained for external geographical features to which a community was and is closely related in economic, cultural and political terms (Back 2002; Jordan 2000a, 2000b, 2009, 2020). Close relations to external features result in a frequent use of their names that need for this very reason to be easily and safely pronounced, to be easily memorized. The spatial pattern of exonym use reflects thus the historical and current political, cultural and economic relations of a community as it will be demonstrated further below by the example of Italian exonyms of European cities in frequent use based on a list of exonyms elaborated by Sandro Toniolo (Toniolo 2002), the contemporary Italian representative in the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) drawing its corpus from a selection of Italian geographical school atlases and representing the body of exonym knowledge typical for a better educated segment of the Italian society.

It has, however, also to be admitted that there exist additional factors affecting the use of exonyms and thus distorting to some extent the spatial pattern mentioned before. These are first and foremost the use of prestigious trade languages that reduces the necessity of exonyms as well as linguistic relations between languages that work into both directions (see Jordan 2019b, 2022).

With the spatial spread of Italian exonyms for European cities (see Figure 1) – to discuss this case as an example – two aspects are most characteristic: their crowding along the eastern coast of the Adriatic as well as in the Ionian and Aegean space; their high density in German-speaking and adjacent areas (especially Belgium, but also the Netherlands and Bohemia [Čechy]²).

Their crowding along the eastern coast of the Adriatic as well as in the Ionian and Aegean space is mainly the heritage of Venice [Venezia]. During its expansion as a seafaring power well into the eastern part of the Mediterranean, it founded or incorporated many towns and trade posts and gave them a Venetian name that was later regarded as Italian. But also after the end of Venice as a political power in 1797, Venetian/Italian names for these places

² Except with country names, in this article an exonym is always accompanied by the endonym in rectangular brackets, when it appears for the first time.

were well perpetuated. At first by Austria that ‘inherited’ the eastern Adriatic coast from Venice and did not substantially interfere into its ethno-social stratification. It saw Venetians, later called Italians, as the dominant group with their names (like *Ragusa* [*Dubrovnik*], *Spalato* [*Split*], *Cattaro* [*Kotor*]) as the most prestigious. Later, already since Italy’s unification between 1859 and 1870, but even more so after World War I and the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, Italian national interests were very much focused on these regions including temporal Italian political transgressions (“mare nostro”), e.g., during World War II. Since Italians remained as a substantial minority only at Istria’s [Istra] west coast, where their names also enjoy officiality, all Italian names for places southeast of it count as exonyms today and are represented as such on Figure 1.

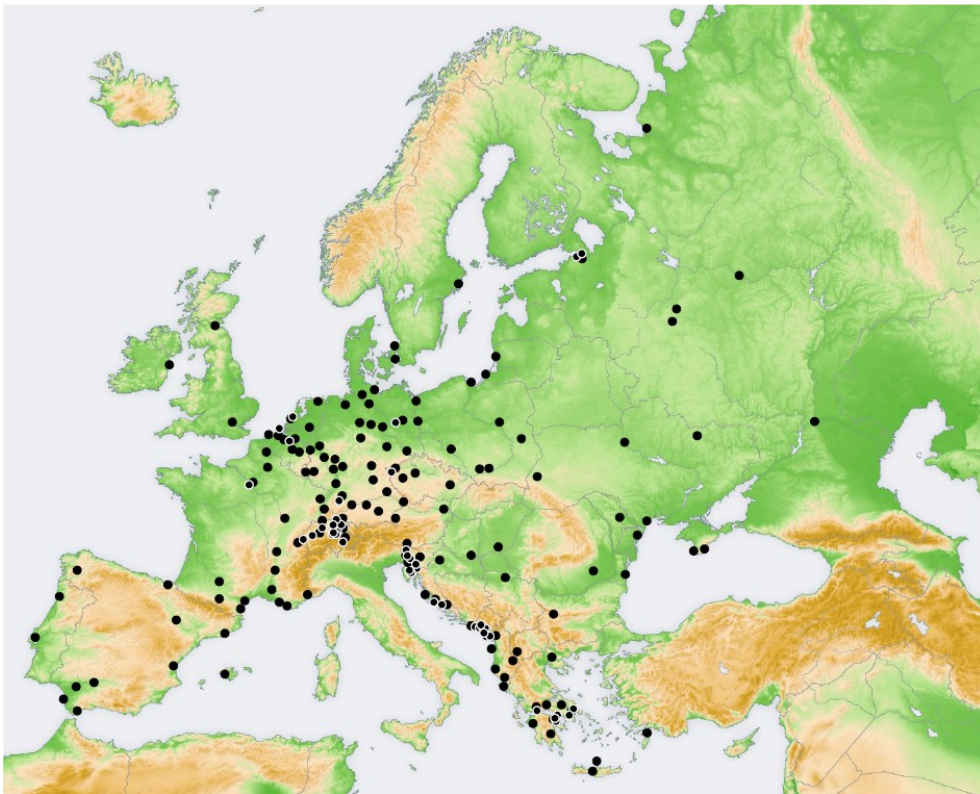


Figure 1: Italian exonyms for populated places in Europe. (Author’s draft after [Toniolo 2002](#).)

The impressive density of Italian exonyms in German-speaking and adjacent areas can be explained historically as well as by current relations and linguistically. To start with the linguistic reason, it is the difficulty of most Italian speakers pronouncing many German names. This would, however, not be so much a problem, if these names would not frequently be needed due to close historical and current relations. Historically, northern parts of present-day Italy were for centuries part of the Holy Roman Empire, a political union

with close internal trade relations. This union comprised all German-speaking countries and Belgium, the Netherlands and Bohemia as well. It is very telling in this context that all Norden languages except Finnish use German exonyms for places in Italy. After World War II, Germany as well as the Benelux countries became privileged destinations of Italian labour migration and emigration.

The non-Italian speaking parts of Switzerland are a special case due to Switzerland's intensive internal relations and Italian being one of the three (four) official (national) languages at the federal level, while all these languages are locally official only where they are spoken by the local population following the territorial principle.

The in relation to other languages like German high density of Italian exonyms also on the British Isles, in France and on the Iberian Peninsula has besides historical (Roman Empire, West Roman Empire, Franconian Empire) mainly linguistic reasons: Characters of the original name provoking exophonic pronunciation in Italian are replaced by characters avoiding this (e.g., Italian *Valenza* for Spanish *Valencia*); transparent components of Romance names are translated (e.g., Italian *Palma di Mallorca* for Spanish *Palma de Mallorca*); the Italian habit to avoid ending a word by a consonant creates endonymoids in the sense of Peeter Päll (Päll 2011) (e.g., Italian *Edinburgo* for English *Edinburgh*). While all these adaptations to the receiver language correspond to the intention of preserving the endonym as much as possible, they escape our definition of the endonym as presented before as well as the definition by the UN Glossary of Terms for the Standardization of Geographical Names (UNGEEN 2022b).

2.3. Exonyms relate a community with its history

There is no question that in the literature of a certain linguistic community historical events, places and people are referred to by those name forms that were valid at the time of the event, at the time referred to or that have long been used for this purpose by the receiver community (are part of its literature) (see Stani-Fertl 2009). In many cases they are today exonyms due to a change of the endonym.

French historiography will certainly continue to speak of the battle of *Austerlitz*, German historiography of the battle of *Thannenberg* and Austrian historiography of the battles of *Lepanto* or *Lissa*, although all of these places have different endonyms today.

Using these exonyms also for the feature in the same place today is frequently impossible or not advisable. It is certainly not possible in the cases of *Vindobona* for Roman Vienna [Wien], *Nova Roma* or *Constantinopolis* for the Roman and East Roman, *Byzantium* or *Byzantion* for the Byzantine Istanbul [İstanbul], where these exonyms refer to exclusively historical concepts and not to the modern concept of these cities – in fact not to the same feature as Paul Woodman impressively explained this in his treatise “What is a name change?” (Woodman 2016). It is also not advisable in cases like *Auschwitz*

[*Oświęcim*], where according to our modern understanding *Auschwitz* refers to the concentration camp and has thus a specific connotation, while *Oświęcim* refers to the city – both names actually denoting different concepts.

In cases like *Canton [Guangzhou]* or with most country names and names of historical-cultural landscapes, however, the use of a traditional exonym also in present-day contexts may help to underline the continuity of the place and to emphasize the identity between the historical feature and the current place. The same applies when in modern speech or texts explicit reference is made to a linguistic community's historical or current diaspora.

2.4. Exonyms are the reference of endonymic name systems

It is a frequent practice to name streets and other traffic areas after external places to which a given community has close relations – be it that the street leads in their direction, e.g., *Triester Straße* in Vienna after Trieste [Trieste] in Italy, or for commemorative reasons, e.g., because this external place played an important role for the city naming a street or square after it, e.g., *Avenue de Wagram* in Paris after Deutsch-Wagram, the place of a Napoleonic victory in Austria, or is very important in general, e.g., the former name *Moszkva tér* for a square in Budapest, after Moscow [Moskva].

Not only streets, but also other features can be named after external places for commemorative reasons: buildings like railway stations (e.g., *Gare d'Austerlitz* in Paris after the German exonym for Slavkov u Brna in Czechia), shelter huts in the Austrian Alps (e.g., *Karlsbader Hütte* after the German exonym *Karlsbad* for Karlovy Vary in Czechia, see Figure 2), dishes (e.g., *Krakauer*, the name of a sausage after the German exonym for Krakau [Kraków] in Poland), drinks (e.g., *Erlauer Stierblut*, a wine named after *Erlau*, the German exonym for Eger in Hungary) or music groups (e.g., *Egerländer Musikanten* after *Egerland*, a German exonym for a region in Czechia), due to their foundation from there, for marketing purposes or because this is their place of origin.

They are, as the examples demonstrate, usually named by the exonyms in common use for these places that assume in this other function the status of endonyms and constitute the germ of a name system in the receiver community. They provide a strong argument for preserving the use of exonyms for these external places not to lose the connection between this external place and the domestic name system. Would the corresponding exonyms get out of use, the meaning of these endonyms would become intransparent.



Karlsbader Hütte

Figure 2: Alpine shelter hut Karlsbader Hütte in the Lienz Dolomites [Lienzer Dolomiten] as advertised in the tourist portal of Tyrol [Tirol]. (Source: [Tirol.at](https://www.tirol.at).)

3. Consequences for standardization

Standardization and exonyms are in a delicate relationship to each other, since the original paradigm of standardization is the ‘one name for one feature principle’ aiming at unambiguity for the sake of precise and safe orientation and avoiding conflict about which and whose name is the correct one. Exonyms are always names additional to the endonym, the primary name used by the local community. Exonyms thus violate this principle and do not conform to the idea of standardization. This was also a reason, why the United Nations and their Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) fought from the very beginning against exonyms passing in the 1970s and 1980s several resolutions that recommended the reduction of exonyms and their limited use (Res. II/29-1972, Res. II/35-1972, Res. III/18-1977, Res. IV/20-1982, Res. V/13-1987, [UNGEGN 2022a](#)). These recommendations were to be implemented by their member states, i.e., by standardization measures at the national level.

In the course of the 1980s, however, very much inspired by [Ferjan Ormeling](#)’s seminal book on minority place names on maps ([Ormeling 1983](#)), appreciation and respect for names used by minority and indigenous groups rose and promoted the understanding that a name used by a minority or indigenous group co-inhabiting a place is not just a (by the principles of standardization undesirable) variant endonym like a name in a language variant or a nickname but deserves to be elevated to a rank equal to the standardized name used by the majority. This was a first blow to the ‘one name for one feature principle’. The

United Nations now recognized that a feature could have with perfect justification two or even more (in cases of several local groups) standardized names.

The second blow followed in the 2000s, when in the kind of a ‘cultural turn’ in toponomastics the awareness of place names as parts of the cultural heritage rose. Already the 8th United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names (UNCSGN) 2002 in Berlin passed Resolution VIII/9-2002 on “Geographical names as cultural heritage”.³ 17 October 2003, the [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization \(UNESCO\)](#) adopted the [Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage](#) highlighting “oral traditions and expressions, including language” as a domain of the intangible cultural heritage ([UNESCO 2023](#)).⁴ At the 9th UNCSGN 2007 in New York, H el ene-Marie Gosselin, as a representative of UNESCO, gave a presentation on the promotion and protection of languages, including geographical names as part of the cultural heritage, recalling the 2003 Convention and considering the development of strategies to meet the Millennium Development Goals ([UNGEEN 2022c: 11](#)). The same Conference passed Resolution IX/4-2007 on “Geographical names as intangible cultural heritage”⁵, and a year later, in 2008, UNGEEN’s Dutch- and German-Speaking

³ Res. VIII/9 Geographical names as cultural heritage. “The Conference, Recognizing the emphasis placed by delegates to the Eighth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names on the importance of geographical names as part of a nation’s historical and cultural heritage, Noting that the collection of geographical names in many countries of the world is made increasingly difficult as a result of the rapid pace of socio-economic change impacting on society and landscape, Recalling the recommendation made by the Second United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in its resolution 27, as well as the recommendations made by the Seventh Conference in its resolution VII/5, that measures be taken nationally to ensure that names that are yet to be collected are recorded through fieldwork according to local usage of name forms, Urges countries that have not already done so, to undertake both the systematic collection of geographical names and the promotion of a greater understanding among the wider public of the significance of inherited geographical names with respect to local, regional and national heritage and identity” ([UNGEEN 2022](#)).

⁴ The Convention mentions in its Article 2/2 examples for the intangible cultural heritage: “The ‘intangible cultural heritage’ [...] is manifested inter alia in the following domains: (a) oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage; (b) performing arts; (c) social practices, rituals and festive events; (d) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; (e) traditional craftsmanship” ([UNESCO 2023](#)).

⁵ Res-IX/4 Geographical names as intangible cultural heritage. “The Conference, Recalling its resolutions II/27, II/36, V/122, VII/5, VIII/1 and VIII/9, Considering the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage adopted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization on 17 October 2003, Recognizing that toponyms are indeed part of the intangible cultural heritage, Noting that the use of certain toponyms which provide a sense of identity and of continuity is under a variety of threats, 1. Encourages the official bodies responsible for toponymy to: (a) Identify toponyms that meet the criteria for application of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage; (b) Submit them to the Committee set up by the Convention, for approval; (c) Prepare a programme to safeguard and develop that heritage in accordance with article

Division organized in Vienna [Wien] a well-attended GeoNames Symposium on “Geographical Names as a Part of the Cultural Heritage” followed by a comprehensive volume of proceedings (Jordan et al. 2009). Based on these considerations, a third resolution (Res. X/3-2012) defining criteria for establishing and evaluating the nature of geographical names as cultural heritage was passed by the 10th UNCSGN 2012 in New York (UNGEGN 2022a).⁶ At the 27th UNGEGN Session framing this UNCSGN in New York, UNGEGN’s Working Group on the Promotion of Indigenous and Minority Group Place Names that had been established by the 8th UNCSGN 2002 in Berlin transformed its name to “Working Group on Geographical Names as Cultural Heritage”.

All kinds of place names and all their variants were now appreciated likewise and none of them should fall into oblivion, if possible, even be documented and kept in active use. This comprised not explicitly, but implicitly also exonyms as traditional, vital and functional parts of every language. The ‘one name for one feature principle’ of standardization has thus in practice been replaced by a ‘one name for one feature per language principle’, while in formal terms the UN resolutions on exonyms passed in the 1970s and 1980s actually contradict resolutions referring to place names as cultural heritage. This contradiction has for the first time officially been addressed in the 2nd (new) UNGEGN Session in 2021, and the need for (also a formal) reconciliation between the two approaches has been formulated (see UNGEGN 2022d).

2, paragraph 3, and article 18 of the Convention; (d) Start implementing it. 2. Calls upon the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization to give sympathetic consideration to requests for support that the High Contracting Parties submit to it for such activities” (UNGEGN 2022a).

⁶ X/3 Criteria for establishing and evaluating the nature of geographical names as cultural heritage. “The Conference, Noting the existence of a number of resolutions that address toponymy as part of a nation’s cultural heritage and the necessity to preserve toponymic heritage, Recalling recommendation C of its resolution I/4 on the principles of office treatment of geographical names, Considering that, to develop these principles, it is recommended that unnecessary changes to geographical names should be avoided and that the treatment of names should not result in the suppression of significant toponymic elements, Considering also that none of these principles describe how to recognize a name that should be protected for its cultural heritage qualities, Recommends that, to recognize and protect such a geographical name or a corpus of geographical names, the following criteria be used: (a) The age of a name, as indicated by the date of the oldest possible record of the name; (b) The resilience of a name, as indicated by the duration of its continued use up to the present or by its notable capacity to transcend history; (c) The rarity of a name or of a toponymic phenomenon pointed out by the name; (d) The “testimoniality” of a name, or its capacity to clearly embody a cultural, geographical, historical, social or other reality that is specific to the place and an essential component of local, regional or national identity; (e) The appeal of a name, which corresponds to a feeling of belonging associated with the name and the place it designates; (f) The imageability of a name, or its capacity to inspire ideas or strong, rich images within users, without these images or ideas necessarily referring to history or local trivia” (UNGEGN 2022a).

4. Conclusion

In conclusion it can be said that highlighting exonyms as parts of the cultural heritage means appreciating their value not only as means of domestic (intra-cultural) communication, as favouring the consistent use of one's own language, their importance for the acquisition of cultural techniques (e.g., geographical knowledge, topographical orientation), community and identity building, but also their roles in relating various aspects of culture, most specifically in the diachronic perspective.

This approach, however, is not to neglect that the use of geographical names in general is politically and culturally sensitive because they express identity. The use of exonyms is particularly sensitive because they designate 'foreign' places and are therefore often associated with claims. This is especially true for exonyms that have been historical endonyms, i.e., names that were once the names of a local community that no longer exists there today. Thus, it is always necessary to weigh the pros and cons of using exonyms and to consider their political and cultural sensibility (see Jordan 2000a, 2000b, 2022).

But it is also obvious (and this contribution should have demonstrated this) that in domestic (intra-cultural, intra-community) communication advantages clearly prevail and disadvantages are practically absent.

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