

# The endonym/exonym divide related to transboundary features: Recent discussions in the UNGEGN Working Group on Exonyms

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## Abstract

*In recent discussions within the Working Group on Exonyms, in the context of the naming of transboundary features, two divergent positions as regards the status of the name, whether it is an endonym or an exonym, evolved. Position A confines the endonym status to portions of a transboundary feature, where the name corresponds to the local language. Position B grants this status to all portions of such a feature.*

*In this paper first the two positions are explained. Secondly Position A is supported by the argument that with the name/language/feature relation also social groups as the main factors and exclusive agents in the naming process have to be regarded.*

## 1. Problem outline

Starting from the question whether names of international waters fall into the exonym-endonym divide or must be attributed to a third terminological

category (Woodman 2008, see also Kadmon 2007), an intensive e-mail discussion evolved between members of the UNGEGN Working Group on Exonyms. This found its intermediate climax at the 25<sup>th</sup> UNGEGN Session in Nairobi, 5-12 May 2009, to which several papers on this topic were submitted (Jordan 2009b, Woodman 2009a, Woodman 2009b). It revealed a basic discordancy as regards the status of names related to transboundary features (e.g. larger rivers, mountain ranges) as well as features beyond a single sovereignty (e.g. seas) and the name/feature relation in general. Two principal positions evolved during this discussion:

**Position A:** A name is an endonym only in these portions of a transboundary 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 transboundary feature, where this language is not spoken. In portions where this language is not spoken, the endonym status is, however, not "applied".

The two positions clarified by graphic representation:

With reference to features on land

L = Language, N = Name

Fig. 1: Position A

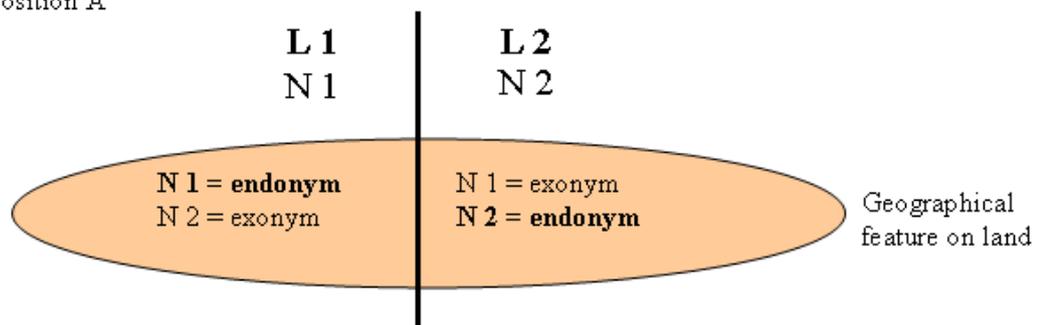
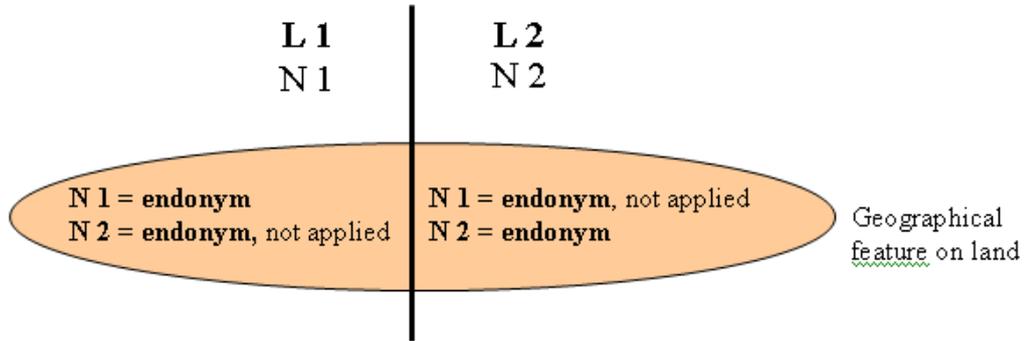
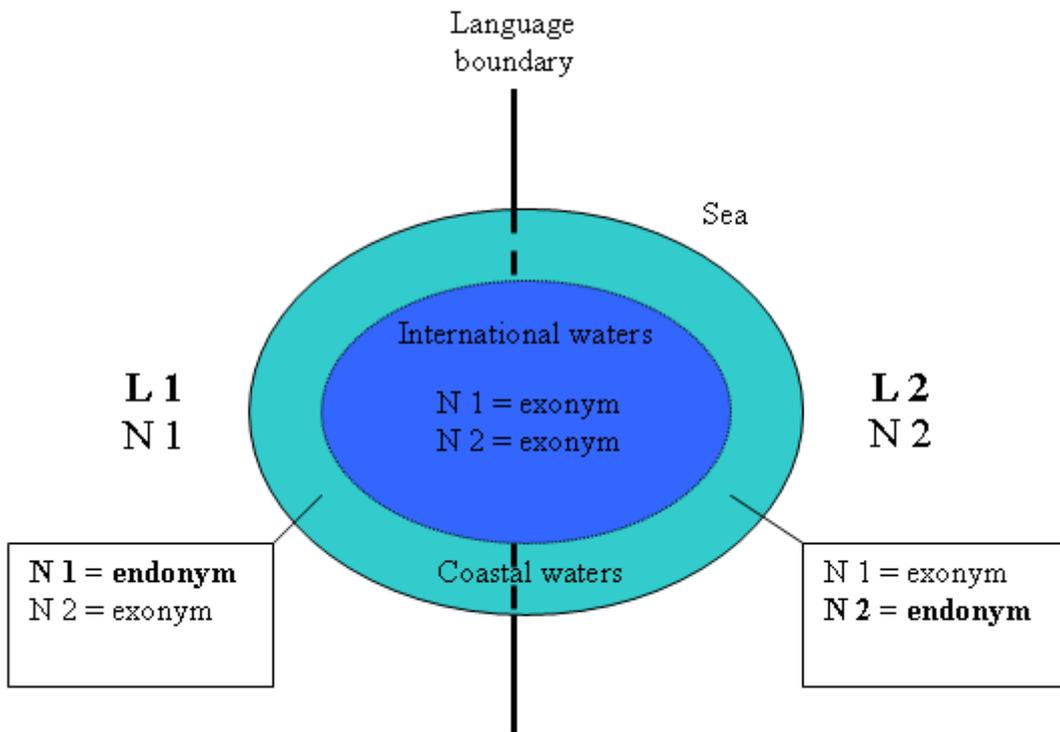


Fig. 2: Position B

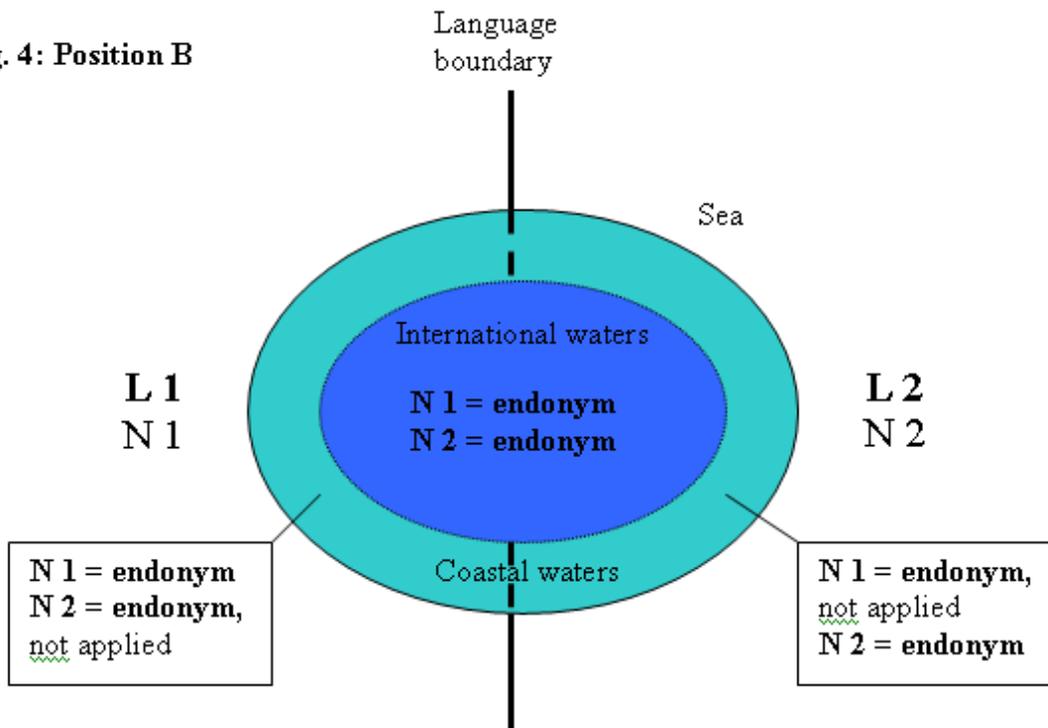


With reference to seas

Fig. 3: Position A



**Fig. 4: 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 **East Sea or Sea of Japan**

- **Position A** would mean that the Japanese name has endonym status only for coastal waters along the coasts of Japan,
- while **Position B** would imply that the Japanese name is an endonym also for the coastal waters of the Koreas and Russia. The endonym status is, however, not effectuated or "applied" for coastal waters of these other countries.

It must be remarked that also for Position A a certain name refers always to the whole transboundary feature and not only to the portion, where the own language is spoken. The name just shifts at the language boundary in status from endonym to exonym. French *les Alpes*, e.g., is, of course, the French name for the whole mountain range across several European countries and not only for the French-speaking portions. But it has endonym status only in the French-speaking portions and exonym status in the others. Accordingly, the Japanese name for the East Sea or Sea of Japan marks, of course, the whole sea including all coastal waters, but it has endonym status only in the coastal waters of Japan.

## **2. My main argument in favour of Position A**

In this discussion I support Position A, while Paul WOODMAN may be called the proponent of Position B.

His main argument, as far as I understood it (but he is present and can explain his arguments certainly much better than I can do it), is that the speakers of a certain language have emotional relations not only to this portion of a transboundary feature, where their language is spoken, but to the feature in total, for the very reason that it is the same feature. He illustrates this argument very impressively by the example of the North Sea and the people of Newcastle, who inhabit the coast of this sea and have developed emotional ties not only to features on land, but also to the coastal waters, since also these coastal waters are part of their living sphere. They are fishgrounds, offer opportunities for recreation and they form a part of the panorama just as features on land do.

Since coastal waters cannot be separated from the sea in total and are part of one and the same feature, i.e. the North Sea, their emotional relations, Paul WOODMAN argues, refer to the North Sea in total, also to portions "where it

whases the coasts of Norway" or some other country, i.e. where the local language is a different one. Their name for the sea, the English name North Sea, is an endonym, a name from within, all over the North Sea, even in its remotest parts, since English speakers reside along the coasts of this sea, have an emotional relation to the feature in total and implicitly also to these remotest parts.

Transferred to the East Sea or the Sea of Japan this would mean that the Japanese name is an endonym, a name from within, also along the Korean coasts, since the Japanese live on coasts of this sea and it is the same feature also where this sea whases the coasts of Korea.

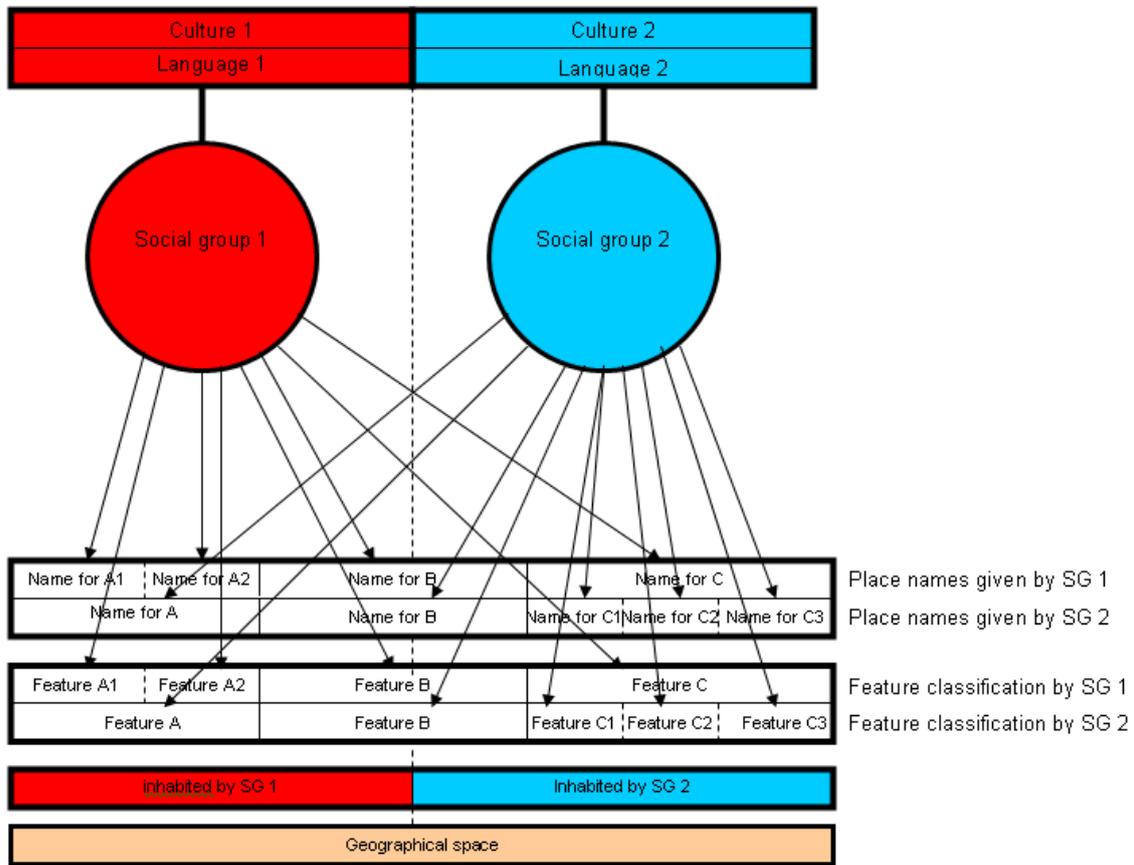
I agree to Paul's argument insofar as I accept his statement that for coastal dwellers coastal waters are a part of their living sphere as much as features on land are.

I draw my own experience in this respect from the Croatian Adriatic coast, where I spent much time for geographical research in the early 1980s. From this experience and from many talks with inhabitants I know that coastal dwellers have strong emotional ties to their coastal waters going as far as the blessing "of the sea and all that lives in it" by a priest at the Catholic holyday of Corpus Christi. This leads me also to the conclusion that names for coastal waters can assume the status of endonyms, of names from within, as much as names for mountain ranges or swamps –also rather uninhabited places– can do.

But my support for this argument ends, where another language community, the group of speakers of another language, is closer to the (same) feature, has the closer emotional relations to it and has therefore the first right on the primary name, i.e. the endonym. This occurs at the latest in the coastal waters of the opposite coast inhabited by speakers of a different language having a different name for the same feature.

At this stage it may be useful to have a look at the process of naming and the factors involved in it.

**Fig. 5: Scheme of factors and relations in the naming process**



The factors involved and shown in Fig. 5 are the geographical space, which is inhabited by social groups of all kinds and sizes. These social groups have developed a certain culture including a certain language, variant language or dialect, as an element of this culture. Social groups classify geographical space into geographical features which form subunits of geographical space. Classification by different social groups may result in different classifications of the same space due to divergent cultural backgrounds and divergent views on reality of the social groups involved. As an element of its language the social group then attributes a name to a feature. For features outside the territory inhabited by a social group, especially for more remote features, a social group and its language have names of their own only for features of special importance or of specific interest for the group. It may also have a name only for the more comprehensive concept of a feature, not for its subunits (This case is represented in Fig. 5).

In our context it is important that in the naming process not only the elements "name", "language" and "feature" play a role. The principal element, in fact the exclusive agent is the social group. The social group elaborates a certain culture and language, it classifies geographical space, i.e. complex spatial reality, into geographical features<sup>1)</sup> and attributes names to them.

Social groups have usually also a stable location in space: they reside more or less permanently in certain places, they transform them and leave a certain cultural footprint, which is also visible and termed "cultural landscape" by cultural geographers. Social groups receive in turn a part of their identity from their relation to places and from their cultural landscape and have developed emotional ties to it. Place names are specific expressions of these ties on the one hand and support them on the other (JORDAN 2009a). "Naming turns space into place" as Bill WATT puts it (WATT 2009, p. 21).

It is therefore impossible to regard the name/language/feature relation apart from the social group and its relations to territory and place. And this means in turn that sociological, political and juridical aspects always remain involved. We cannot escape them as it is perhaps the intention of Paul WOODMAN, when he argues that a name remains an endonym even across language boundaries. It will, to the contrary, arouse suspicion and meet objection with the local social group, if somebody else claims to have the endonym, the name from within, for their home.

It is true that our environment, our sphere of interest usually exceeds the limits of our language community and that our personal rank list of best-acquainted or favourite features may include quite a number of features outside our own language area. When we become aware of our role as global citizens we may even arrive at the opinion that no feature on this globe leaves us unaffected and we are in the middle of everything. From this point of view indeed all place names are names from within and the endonym/exonym divide loses its meaning.

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1) All geographical features are mental constructs. Also islands, mountain peaks or rivers seemingly features clearly defined by nature are no exception: How difficult it is to define islands can be seen from a documentation and classification recently performed in Indonesia (see Secertariat of National Team for Standardization of Geographical Names, Indonesia); mountain peaks have only been conceived as individual features and received names after the rise of Alpinism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; with rivers it has to be decided which of the sources should be the main source.

But we should not go as far, since it is already the next social group, our neighbouring language community, nation, regional community, dialect group a.s.o. which must make us getting down to the earth and which requires our attention. This other group is not only –as we are– a temporary and occasional visitor at one of these other places, but inhabits it permanently and has developed much closer ties to it than we have. It is therefore this other group which has the first right on the name, whose name is the primary name, the endonym. It would mean an offense to this group to deny this right and to claim it for ourselves.

This refers to all scales, whether the adjective "transboundary" in transboundary features means the boundary between languages, nations, dialects or just between smallest communities, e.g., in the case of tenure boundaries between families speaking the same language and dialect.

Right this example at the lower end of the scale may be suitable to highlight the issue in all sharpness: For a farmer and his family not only his own farmstead and his own fields are parts of his personal environment. He will surely also take some interest in the farmstead and fields of his neighbour. He may even have names for the farmstead and fields of his neighbour differing from the names the neighbour has given them. Would it be fair, socially compatible and politically correct to call them endonyms, names from within?

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