

Whose toponym? – A note for deliberation on place names

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Place names do not belong solely to the community that occupies the geographical feature. For example, there was a local authority in Japan that decided to sell their "naming rights" for the name of the city, which triggered outrage across the country. In many cases when two local authorities merge, the new name is discussed only between the two authorities. This has often led to a regrettable result with the extinction of two traditional names and a creation of a new portmanteau name or a name that is out of geographical context. When it comes to exonyms, it is the language community that uses the exonym to decide which name to use. This implies that we have to acknowledge that names of large seas cannot be decided only among just two countries that share some parts of the coastline.

INTRODUCTION

In Japan, there is no single authority that is in charge of all toponyms. Publishers and the mass media decide on their own which names to use. Local authorities seem to assume that they have powers over all the toponym of features within their boundary. This has led to various issues, such as selling the naming rights of geographical features, and emergence of rather problematic names in local authority mergers. This paper gives thoughts on the "ownership" and management of toponyms. The discussion is extended to exonyms as well as endonyms

NAME FOR SALE?

In November 2012, Izumi-Sano city in Osaka Prefecture opened a bid for selling the naming rights of their city name. This was part of numerous efforts to pay back the immense debt the city had accumulated. They had made intensive investments on public facilities based on the speculation of increased tax revenue resulting from the opening of Kansai International Airport in 1994. The expected revenue increase did not materialise, and they ended up borrowing a lot of money. In 2009, the national government had designated Izumi-Sano as organisation that requires immediate fiscal reconstruction. In this process, while some local citizens expressed understanding

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considering the huge debt they face, there was a wide criticism and opposition across the country against this policy action. In the end, no company entered a bid and the name remained as it is.

Kamakura city (Kanagawa prefecture) an ancient capital city of Japan, sold the name of their beach. In May 2013, a local confectionery company, Toshima-ya, purchased the 10-year naming rights for the three beaches that were under the jurisdiction of the municipality, at a price of JPY 120 Million. The company received many pleas from citizens in- and outside Kamakura, requesting not to change the names. Kamakura attracts tourists from all over Japan, and these beaches are popular destinations from Tokyo. In May 2014, the company decided to solicit suggestions for the new name from the general public. The majority of the entries suggested keeping the original name. Following this result, the company promised to keep the names as they are for the coming 3 years (Yuigahama Kaisuiyokujyo, Zaimokuza Kaisuiyokujyo and Koshigoe Kaisuiyokujyo), and this decision was much welcomed.

These events show that the Japanese society does not accept that the local community has the sole control over the names of the geographic features within their boundary, albeit decisions to sell naming rights were made democratically by locally elected councillors. Toponyms should not be changed easily for financial gain.

As a side note, despite some unsuccessful cases such as those mentioned above, sales of naming rights for public facilities have become widespread. Many of these facilities (such as railway stations) are important landmarks in the area, and the commercial naming is imposing a strong influence on the usage of place names.

MERGER OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Reflecting the expansion of the daily living area of the citizens, and the need of economising local government expenditure, merger of local authorities is happening in many parts of the world. Japan is no exception. The central government enacted a law promoting the merger of local authorities. Between 1999 and 2006, the number of basic level local authorities (shi:city, cho:town, son:village) decreased from 3232 to 1820. This is known as the great Heisei merger (Heisei is the reign name of the current emperor).

In some cases, smaller authorities were absorbed into (integrated as a part of) a bigger authority and the name of the bigger authority continued, but in most cases, mergers on equal terms were favoured. In such cases, a new authority with a new name will be created. A merger committee will be formed with representatives from the authorities involved in the merger, and this committee will decide on the new name, amongst other items that need to be agreed regarding the merger. Naming had often been a hot issue, and some merger discussions broke up due to disagreement over the new name.

As discussion took place only among representatives from the merging local authorities, the committee tended to be too obsessed with obtaining internal agreement, and decisions were often made with a lack of wider concerns. As a result many problematic names were created.

One genre of new naming is "portmanteau" names. Long before the Heisei batch of mergers, Ota district in Tokyo was created by the merger of Omori and Kamata districts. When names are truncated and put together, people can be puzzled or misled on the etymology. With Kanji (Chinese characters) it is especially so. "Big forest" (Omori 大森) combined with "paddy field with reed" (Kamata 蒲田) became a "big paddy field" (Ota 大田). Not only portmanteau names, but also any replacement of historical name with a new synthesised name disconnects the history from the place. It could be said this is a heritage being lost. Important historical events often carry the name of the place where it happened, but the place name will not be there any more. Many real place names appear in literature classics. However for example, in Tokyo, it is difficult to trace the places in works by authors even from the early 20th century.

Place names with directional indication have increased (this tendency has been reported for the case in UK as well (Guardian 2013)). These pay less attention to local features and refer more to the wider area. Recent examples are Shikoku Chuo city ("Central Shikoku city", Ehime Pref.), and Nishi Tokyo city (West Tokyo city). The former is located somewhat in the middle of Shikoku Island, but is a rather small city. There were complaints and criticisms from citizens especially from the other three prefectures comprising Shikoku. As for the latter, there are many cities that have a larger population and central functions in the western suburb of Tokyo, and it leads to a question as to why this particular small locality deserves the name "West Tokyo"? Basically, in both cases, the names do not reflect the local identity, nor match the scale of the locality.

This also happens when an existing regional name was applied to the new authority, and the area that is described by the name is much bigger than the boundary of the authority. Setouchi city (瀬戸内市 Okayama Pref.) is an example. There are probably more than 100 local authorities that have a coast on the Inland Sea (瀬戸内海 Setonaikai), but the name applies to just the three small towns that were merged. This destroys the hierarchical structure of place names. The fundamental function of place names is to point to the intended specific place, but such names do not serve the purpose well.

Another tendency particular to the Heisei merger is the proliferation of Hiragana names. Most of these are just a transcription of an existing Kanji name into Hiragana. Many merger committees started out on the premise that the name of the new merged authority shall differ from any of the names of the comprising authorities. Changing the script from Kanji to Hiragana is probably just for the sake of showing that the new name is differently written from the old one. Similar to portmanteau names, with Hiragana names it is difficult to figure out the meaning / etymology of the name. In addition, if the name is written in Kanji, it is much easier to comprehend for visitors with cultural backgrounds influenced by Chinese script.

Above examples suggest that new place names should not be decided only among the communities that are involved in the merger. A much wider geographical and historical perspective is required. Imao (2006) noted that many of the unpopular names concocted in the previous mergers have disappeared in the renaming due to the Heisei mergers. It shows that narrow-minded renaming does not survive long, and just creates confusion.

ENDONYMS AND EXONYMS

Place names developed initially as names for the living space of villagers. Names can be derived from village names, such as "coast of Negishi," or in accordance with the direction, for example, "the mountains to the east". In general, these names start as common nouns, which will then be adopted by neighbouring villages and beyond, and turn into proper nouns. In the process, many identical names can evolve as proper nouns. For example, "Ohshima" (big island) appears in many places in Japan. This is an endonym in its pure form, in the sense that it emerged from and is being used by the local community. However, having several "Ohshima" is not ideal from a wider perspective. At the national level, it is not clear which "Ohshima" one is talking about. The name would not serve the function of specifying a unique place. Eventually each "Ohshima" was specified by adding the regional name, such as "Izu-Ohshima," "Amami-Ohshima," and "Kii-Ohshima." Still locally within the region, simply "Ohshima" suffices as a proper noun, while prefixes are added in the context of a wider area. All these prefixed "Ohshima" are technically endonyms as they belong to the language that is used locally, but they also have a characteristic of an exonym, in the sense that the name is used outside the local community, and differs from the one being used within the local community. The implication of this is that endonyms belong to the whole language community, not only to the locality where the feature is located.

If a different name is used outside the language community in which the feature is located, that would be an exonym. There are various types in the formation of exonyms, but many of them are well embedded in each language they belong to. Exonyms are part of the vocabulary of the "recipient" language, and it is generally acknowledged that exonyms "belong" to the recipient language community. Wien is the endonym for the capital city of Austria (Österreich), but it is not the Viennese people or government to decide whether it should be called Vienna or otherwise in English. Country names often have exonyms. Names of countries are more often used in different languages outside the country, as reference to "this (our) country" will suffice in the domestic context.

It appears that the bigger or more globally important the feature is, the more likely that the feature will have an exonym (Watanabe 2015). Names of continents are one example of such. According to the definition, the name of the continent in languages spoken within the particular continent will be considered as an endonym (e.g. America del Sur), while names in the language that is not used within, will be an exonym (e.g. Südamerika). However, every pupil in the world learns at schools in their own language about the continents as features of "our" planet. Moreover there is doubt whether names like "America" and "Asia" are exactly endonyms. "America" is named after the name of a European person; "Asia" is also a European concept. Europeans named the continent as "Asia", not the "Asians" who live in the continent.

For large seas, there is no local indigenous population (hence the absence of "well-established language") except its coastal (and islands) people. Following the official definition, probably the names in the languages of all littoral areas and islands of the sea qualify as endonym. In the case of large seas like the Pacific Ocean, there are numerous littoral languages, thus a large number of endonyms. This leads to a curious situation. For example, among European languages, the name in German ("Pazifischer Ozean") is

probably an exonym, while that in English ("Pacific Ocean") is an endonym (there are several countries in and around the ocean with English as one of their official languages). It seems rather strange to give different status to these names, as when those names are used in Europe, there is no significant difference in their nature. In this sense, no particular language should be given a privileged status regarding the naming of features such as high seas.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS TO THE SEA NAME

We have seen above that toponyms do not "belong" to the local community where the object is located. Commercialisation and abrupt changing of names by the local community were not accepted by the wider public. In local authority mergers, deliberation on new names only among the communities involved in the merger, resulted in undesirable names from historical and regional viewpoints. Endonyms need to be administered by the language community in which the object is located, while exonyms are to be managed by the recipient language community. Toponym boards at each country play an important role in this. Regarding the names of big geographical features such as large seas and continents, the distinction between endonym and exonym does not seem very useful. The UNCSCGN resolution on reducing the use of exonyms should not be applied here. When discussing the name of the sea between Korea and Japan, we need to bear in mind that neither the sea itself nor its names in exonym forms are "ours."

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