Motifs for Renaming Geographical Features

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Abstract

The renaming of geographical features has a wide range of reasons. It varies from simple administrative reforms to political changes to the intention of improving the reputation of a feature.

The first part of the paper shows the variety of motifs and possible combinations of reasons and intentions for place name changes. Following this, the report structures these motifs and summarizes them into three categories. This results in a systematic review of reasons for place-name changes. Renaming of geographical features can illustrate historical periods and developments in many fields like politics, social structures, economics, etc.

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The intention of this paper is to
- show the functions of geographical names,
- clarify what is a place-name change,
- find out what are the reasons for place-name changes, and
- structure these reasons for drafting a classification.

The function of geographical names

Geographical names fulfil many objectives. Their two main functions are:

- to identify geographical features uniquely > *identification* and
- to help locating these features in space > *orientation*.

But a toponym bears more than just the information to identify and locate a geographical feature on earth. There is lot of additional information connected to a place-name. And parts of this information may cause social and emotional impacts. When hearing the names *Chernobyl* or *Cannes*, the first association will not be the populated place but probably the dominant connotative content "nuclear disaster" and "film festival".

The additional connotations a toponym transports together with the permanent presence of toponyms in the public and media makes it vulnerable for renaming.

Toponyms can work as an excellent promotion vehicle. Using a name for a certain feature means transporting all its functions and the content of connotations associated with this name to a wide public.

What is a place-name change?

The basics for place-name changing were laid during the 18th and 19th century when most national land surveys took place and cartographers were forced to letter the maps. The need to standardize geographical names arose with national land surveying. "Official" names in large quantities began to exist. Previously most toponyms were written down in different spellings or even not written down but only bequeathed by verbal tradition. Oral dialectal forms must have been written down. The spelling of geographical names must have been standardized.

With the first nationwide land surveys at the end of the 18th and especially in the 19th century the collection of toponyms and their standardization became relevant. Toponyms were

written down systematically on maps or in gazetteers and became more or less standardized and officially by that way.

Three elements are necessary for renaming a geographical feature:

1. an *official name* or at least a standardized name form for a feature;
2. the *demand* for a place-name change;
3. a(n) *(names) authority* to implement a change. This necessarily needs not be a names authority but a legal authority representing the feature.

For this paper place-name change means any kind of renaming a geographical feature by a legal or a semi-legal authority. This renaming may be a complete change of the name, but also only a slight modification like a difference in its spelling, which is not obviously at the first glance.

Toponyms are not constant. They may change for different reasons. Place-name change in this report is defined in a wide understanding. It is any kind of change of a name of a geographical feature by a names authority or a legal body.

Here are some examples of place name changes that should give an impression of the wide range of possible types: *Breslau > Wrocław*; *Klagenfurt > Klagenfurt am Wörthersee*; *Titov Veles > Veles*; *Basses-Alpes > Alpes-de-Haute-Provence*; *Ninety Mile Beach > Eighty Mile Beach*; *Badgastein > Bad Gastein*.

Place name changes – Draft of classification

Reasons for renaming may be manifold. To analyse the reasons for renaming toponyms it was used a bottom-up principle. For a large number of place-name changes the reason(s) and intention(s) for renaming were determined. Following this the second step was to structure this collection and find categories of similar renaming intentions. A classification of motifs has been drafted which is introduced in the following.

After structuring the intentions and reasons for changing place names types for renaming have been found and the classification below has been drafted.

The reasons for renaming geographical features can be summarized into three main categories:

1. Formal reasons
The cause for the place-name change is a formal or legal act. E.g. the adoption of a new law, of an edict, or of recommendations, which makes it necessary to change the toponym.

2. Political reasons
(The change of) the political system / situation prompted to rename geographical features.

3. Reputation

Authorities representing the geographical feature try to improve their image, or to get rid of embarrassing name elements by changing the feature's name. Commercial reasons are a growing segment of place-name changes.

It must be stressed that many place-name changes obviously may be the result of just one intention but could be assigned to more than one motive. In most cases one intention is dominating and others are subordinated or a kind of free-riders.

1. Formal Reasons

Firstly let's have a look at the formal reasons. Three different types can be differentiated.

1.1. Orthographic reforms lead sometimes to a change in the spelling of toponyms. Here is an example from Romania:

- *Tîrgu Mureş > Târgu Mureş*
  And another one from Austria caused by the German spelling reform:
- *Schoberpaß > Schoberpass*.

1.2. Another formal reason may be an *administrative reform*, which urges settlements or administrative units to change their names.

- *Weißenbach > Unterweißenbach* [Austria]
- *Hauterive > Hauterive (NE)* to be distinguished from *Hauterive (FR)* [Switzerland]

1.3. A highly sensitive reason may be the official *change of language* of a toponym.

- *Schuls > Scuol/Schuls* (1943-1970) *> Scuol*
  In Switzerland the official name of Schuls/Scoul was changed from the German one only to a double name in German and Raetho-Romanic and finally to the majority language of the population to Raetho-Romanic only.
- *Königsberg > Kaliningrad*
  Due to political changes in 1945/1946 when the northern part of East Prussia became part of the Soviet Union.
- *Fiume > Rijeka*
  As a result of World War II the ethnic composition of the population has changed.

2. Political reasons

The predominant reasons for renaming a geographical feature and representing the largest share in all place-name changes are political ones. In this category four different aspects seem to be relevant:

2.1. To get rid of a *historical situation* a toponym is standing for.

- *Salisbury > Harare* (capital of Zimbabwe when gaining independence)
- *Ferryville > Menzel Bourguiba* (1956, 1st Tunisian President)
- *Upper Volta > Burkina Faso* [but: Côte-d'Ivoire]

2.2. To stress a political claim or a *political situation*.

- *Taiwan* calls itself *Republic of China* to point out its "entitlement" representing China.
- *Port Stanley*, the capital of the Falkland Islands, became *Puerto Argentino* during the Argentinean occupation of the islands in 1982. Argentina is still using this name to stress its claim on the Malvinas.
- *Tokdo* [Korean] and *Takeshima* [Japanese] are used for a group of small islets and rocks lying in the sea between Korea and Japan to underline the respective national title.

2.3. To *honour* political correct persons: leaders, army officers, but also freedom fighters, or resistance fighters.

- *Zlín > Gottwaldov* (1949-1990) – Klement Gottwald was a Czechoslovakian Communist politician.
- *La Columna > Pico Bolívar* (1934) – highest mountain of Venezuela.

2.4. *Ideological reasons* to emphasize and fortify a political situation.

- *Sankt Peterburg > Petrograd* – Russia abandoned the German roots of the city's name by renaming.

3. Reputation

A very interesting group of place name changes is the following one, which is summarized under the title of "reputation". It contains a colourful variety of reasons for renaming geographical features.

3.1. The first group are names with negative associations. Names authorities want to abandon ***negative connotation*** of a toponym by renaming. They want to get rid of an embarrassing name. Two examples from Austria are:

- *Gaunersdorf* [village of chisellers] > *Gaweinstal* (1917),
- *Stinkenbrunn* [stinking well] > *Steinbrunn* (1958); Burgenland-Croatians, an indigenous minority is still using *Štikapron*. The name derived from the historic German toponym but was not changed because the negative connotation is not obviously.

The following kind of renaming is also part of this category:

- *Seine-Inférieure* [inférieure = inferior] > *Seine-Maritime* (1955) and similar other départements in France.

3.2. To ***honour*** a civil personality or a scientist for its achievements. This category is excluding politicians, military persons and those coming from the political scene, whereas a political background in some cases is obviously.

- *Wittenberg > Lutherstadt Wittenberg* (= *City of Martin Luther*) in Germany since 1938; this addendum to the place-name was thought to honour Martin Luther who was the initiator of the protestant reformation in the 16th century.
- *Gschatsk* [Гжатск] > *Gagarin* in Russia since 1968 to honour the first man in space.

3.3. One group are place-name changes as an ***act of tolerance***. This works mostly respectful towards indigenous groups or minorities.

- *Ayers Rock > Uluru* [Australia]
- *Ems > Domat/Ems* (1943) [Switzerland]; only the German name was official despite the fact that the ethnic majority was Rhaeto-Romanic. In 1943 the double name became official. Although the share of Rhaeto-Romanic speakers is less than 10 % the double name is still official.
- *Redcliff > Ikawai* [New Zealand] – from English to Maori.

3.4. Renaming is caused by ***commercial reasons*** too. An authority wants to stress a certain situation which can promote e.g. tourism, a specific brand, and so on. Commercial and economic intentions seem to become a fast growing sub category of the motives of reputation. It is a rising segment.

All examples shown are from Austria but doubtless, there are similar cases of this type of renaming in many other countries too.

- *Klagenfurt > Klagenfurt am Wörthersee* to stress the lake-side; -*see* = lake
- *Blumau > **Bad** Blumau*; *Bad* = spa.
  Commercialization is pushing heavy pressure on name administrating local authorities like municipalities. Money is a ticklish temptation for renaming geographical features.
- *Mullwitzkogel > Wiesbauerspitze*.

The last one is a quiet interesting one. A small Tyrolean village renamed a mountain summit formerly known as *Mullwitzkogel* to *Wiesbauerspitze*. Wiesbauer is a company producing sausages and one kind of sausage is named *Bergsteiger* which means mountaineer. The intention of the municipality for this renaming was to promote tourism in this region.

Later attempts of renaming mountain summits in Austria, similar to the example above-mentioned, have been initiated but where aborted very quickly due to political resistance and public pressure.

Combination of reasons – The reality

Of course, most place-name changes are a combination of the above-mentioned reasons. In the majority of cases there is one dominant official reason for renaming. Due to connotations of toponyms and the merging of the different types of renaming this leads to the fact that in most cases of renaming more than one category is affected:

As an example stands here the city of

➢ **Sankt-Peterburg** (till 1914) – the old Czaristic name.
➢ **Petrograd** (1914-1924) – In 1914 Sankt Peterburg was renamed to Petrograd. Russia abandoned the German roots of the city's name by renaming (negative connotation). It is the expression of Russification (change of language) the elimination of religious symbols associated with the appellative element "Sankt" (ideological reason).
➢ **Leningrad** (1924-1992) – The renaming in 1924 to Leningrad is a reverence for a politician (Lenin), and one also get rid of the historical burden of the Czaristic "Petro".
➢ **Sankt-Peterburg** (since 1992) means back to its roots. In 1991 the majority of the people of St. Peterburg voted in favour to re-establish the old historic name.

Mostly affected by place-name changes are names of populated places. Also some other geographical categories can show examples with a comprehensive (re)naming history. For instance, mountains as an overtopping feature have some examples for name changes.

Let's have a look at **Qullai Ismoili Somoni** or probably better known as Pik Kommunizma.

➢ **Pik Garmo** (till 1933) - It is the highest mountain peak in Tajikistan and it was the highest elevation in the former Soviet Union. Until 1933, it was known as Pik Garmo. That name was transferred to a lower peak to the south, where it has remained because "old" Pik Garmo was needed for a new name.
➢ **Pik Stalina** (1933-1962) which lasted till 1962 at which the name of Stalin was removed and the mountain became known as
➢ **Pik Kommunizma** (1962-1991) – The Soviet Union stressed with this naming a political situation and got rid of a historical burden, namely Josef Stalin who had fallen into disgrace.
➢ **Qullai Kummunizn** (1991-1996) – With the collapse of the Soviet Union the independent country Tajikistan translated the generic term into Tajik. The new name became **Qullai Kummunizn**.
➢ **Qullai Ismoili Somoni** (since 1996) – A couple of years later the term Kummunizn seemed appropriate not more, so it was changed to Qullai Ismoili Somoni. Ismoili Somoni was a historic leader of the Samanids who lived in the 10th century.

Review and final considerations

Figure 1 summarizes the results of the studies and gives an overview on that attempt at classification of place name changes. With this classification all kinds of place name changes

should be covered. It should include all kinds of intentions and reasons, which provoke (naming) authorities to change the name of a geographical feature.
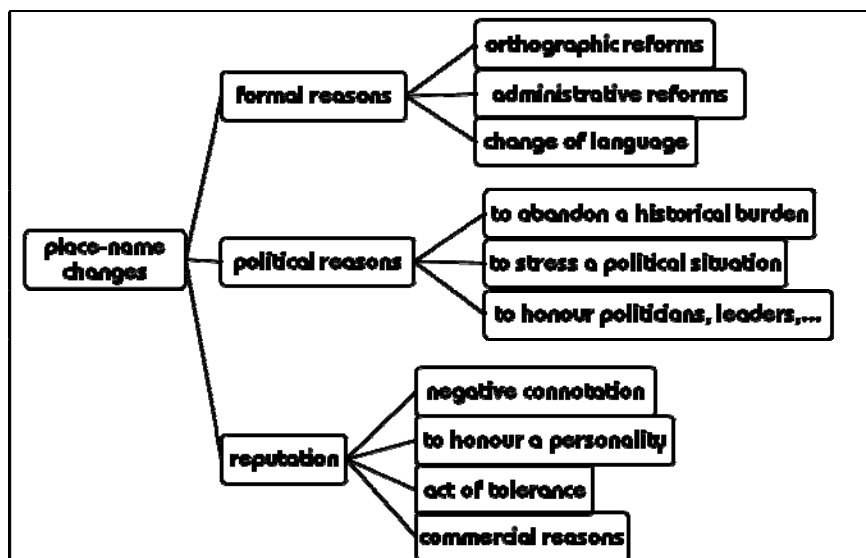

Figure 1. Systematic classification of occurring types of place-name changes.

There are three main categories namely:
- formal reasons (dominating administrative aspects),
- political reasons,
- reputation (with dominating social and economic aspects).

These three categories split into ten sub types.

Concluding here are some final thoughts why place-name changes are of significant interest for not only linguists and map editors.

1. Each toponym represents a segment of history of the geographical feature the name is standing for. It is part of the world's cultural heritage.

Beside its two main functions identification and locating a geographical feature every toponym represents a history. Regardless the duration and the time span a toponym was in use it stands for a certain period of history of the respective geographical feature. Every toponym with its individual cultural, political, and social meaning is part of the intangible cultural heritage of the world.

2. Place-name changes bear witness to historical changes

Historical events and checks took place when crossing from one stage to the next. Place-name changes bear witness to historical changes. They represent historical changes or try to underline new periods.

3. Most place-name changes were caused by political reasons but economic ones gain in importance

Place names work as an excellent advertising vehicle. This was and is still utilized by politics and is realized more and more by the commercial sector. Most place-name changes were caused by political reasons. However, due to commercialization economic reasons will gain in importance.

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