New Approaches to the Approval and Standardization of Aboriginal Toponyms
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Abstract

Canada's naming authorities are becoming more and more involved in the treatment of Aboriginal toponymy as land claim settlements open the way to the approval of hundreds of names that until only very recently, belonged to the oral traditions of Canada's First Nations. This paper explores approaches now being experimented by the Ontario Geographic Names Board in the approval process of these names, sometimes known as unconventional toponyms, namely feature names with no generics and unusually long forms. An on-going experiment in Pikangikum, a remote Ojibwe First Nation in northwestern Ontario, provides data for this paper. Naming practices in British Columbia and in the Inuit communities in Canada's High Arctic and in Greenland provide useful insights and lead to a reconsideration of the traditional generic/specific structure of the geographic name. As well, issues arising from the standardization of native toponymy on a national scale, such as the use of non- conventional alphabets, diacritic signs and syllabic orthography will be addressed. Although not all issues have met with a satisfactory solution, significant progress has been made and will hopefully lead to the full recognition of the geographic names of Canada's First Nations.

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1. Introduction

Aboriginal Names constitute the original toponymic stratum of Canada. These toponyms reach back thousands of years but their exact number and extent cannot be easily determined because of the absence of writing systems in Native communities. These names were transmitted by oral tradition from generation to generation and were recorded in writing for the first time in the languages of European colonisers beginning in the XVIth century. Some of the oldest names in Canada were recorded in French, such as *Hochelaga*, *Saguenay* and the very name of the country, *Canada*, as a result of Jacques Cartier's explorations beginning in 1534

2. Early steps in the recognition of Native toponymy

After an initial period of resistance if not outright hostility towards these names, Canada's naming authorities became interested in the promotion of the Aboriginal stratum of its toponymy, beginning in the early 1950s (Lapierre 1997). Growing awareness and sensivity towards the contribution of the First Nations to the historical and cultural landscape of the country resulted in several important place-name changes such as *Fort Brabant* becoming *Tuktuyaktuk* (NWT) in 1950 and *Fort Chimo* changing to *Kuujaak* (QC) in 1965. At the same time, provinces and territories were beginning to develop tools that would promote a better understanding of these names.

First among several authorities to become involved in the management of native geographic names was the province of Québec. It established a naming authority in 1912 and was the first jurisdiction to hold a workshop on First Nation writing systems. (Gouvernement du Québec 1979). It has since promoted an impressive series of publications on the names of various Aboriginal speech communities located within its legal boundaries (Gouvernement du Québec 1985, 1987, 1990, 1996, 1999, 2001, 2003). At the federal level, the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names (now the Geographic Names Board of Canada) convened an international symposium in 1986 in Ottawa with over 80 participants including representatives from Canada, Australia, Greenland and the United States. At the

conclusion of the conference, 27 resolutions were adopted and have become the corner stone of Canada's policy on Aboriginal Naming. In keeping with Resolution 26 from that conference, each year, the agenda of the Geographical Names Board of Canada includes a specific item dealing with the state of Native toponymy and on the implementation of the resolutions in each jurisdiction. This has lead to an increased level of activity over the years, to such an extent that Aboriginal Naming has now become one of the focal points of the Board. At the same time, the Federal Government has engaged in a series of reflections on its relationship with Native communities (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada 2006).

3. The Ontario experience

The Geographic Names Board of Ontario (OGNB) was created in 1971 with the passage of the Geographic Names Act. The OGNB is the authority governing the naming of geographical features of the province. With the passage of the French Language Services Act in 1986, the Board was called upon to develop specific guidelines concerning the linguistic treatment of French geographical nomenclature in districts where the minority French-speaking population represented at least 10% of the population. The main feature of these guidelines was the introduction of a new concept in Ontario naming protocols, i.e. the *Officially Designated Alternate Name*. As its name indicates, an alternate name is designed to alternate with the official name (usually of English linguistic tradition) in specific contexts, namely mapping, prose-text applications and road signage. Let us look at an example:

Lake of the Woods is the official name of a large body of water located in the northwest portion of the province, extending into the State of Minnesota near the Manitoba border. To the French-speaking minority of Ontario however, the feature is known as *Lac des Bois*. As a result, the OGNB has conferred Alternate Name status to the French name so that on official maps, scale permitting, the name *Lac des Bois* appears in bracketed form under or next to the official name *Lake of the Woods*. On government unilingual French maps and in prose-text applications written in French, only the alternate French form is used. There are currently some 200 French alternate names in the province and the policy has been successfully in place for some 20 years.

More recently, the Board became involved in a mapping initiative in the Far North area of the province where there are many dispersed Cree and Ojibway communities. Pikangikum, a remote First Nation locality in northwestern Ontario near the Manitoba border was selected for a pilot toponymic survey with the aim of recording and preserving the Ojibway names in the area. As a result of the survey, seventeen names in common and local usage were presented for approval to the OGNB. As all of the features involved were lakes that had been previously officially approved in English, the Board was interested in seeing if the Alternate Name policy originally developed for French minority names could be adapted to the Ojibway names of northwestern Ontario.

4. Dialogue with the First Nations

As a first step, the Board contacted the Pikangikum First Nation through its Far North Representative to inform the community of its Principles and Procedures of Geographical Naming (Ontario Geographic Names Board 2010). Some of these principles were met with strong reservations, if not outright opposition by the Pikangikum community. Two issues in particular were singled out, namely the statement on the origin and formation of geographical names in Ontario and the Board's rejection of names that were deemed cumbersome.

With regard to the first issue, the Pikangikum First Nation pointed out, quite correctly, that the OGNB Principles and Procedures made no mention of the contribution of First Nations to the geographical naming process in the province. In the second case, the Pikangigum First Nation feared that their names would be rejected on the sole basis that they were unusually long or difficult to pronounce.

After careful consideration of the issues at hand, the Board decided to modify its Principles and Procedures in response to the concerns of the Pikangikum First Nation. It deleted the clause concerning cumbersome names, reserving judgement on a case by case basis. As well, it made specific mention of the First Nations' involvement in the establishment of the geographical nomenclature of Ontario. Article 1.1. was modified and now includes a more balanced statement concerning the various layers of names in the province:

"Official names in Ontario show the equal and special significance of a number of groups who are responsible for its development, including the First Nations, the first people of this land, whose names demonstrate their intimate connection with the land for thousands of years and the French and English speech communities whose history in our province dates back to the early 1600's." (Ontario Geographic Names Board 2010)

5. The Pikangikum Questionnaire

Taking the dialogue one step further, the Board prepared a questionnaire concerning the names being considered for adoption. The aim was to see to what extent these names could be integrated into the general design of the OGNB names database while addressing issues of orthography and representation on official maps. The following are the questions that were addressed to the Pikangikum First Nation (PFN), the answers that were received and action taken by the Board.

5.1. Question: Would Chief and Council object to the use of existing official names along with the PFN names?

Answer: NO

It was important to find out at the very outset if the Alternate Name principle could be applied in a First Nation context. The First Nation responded it had no objection to the use of the existing (English tradition) official names along with their proposed names. This opened the way for the application of the Alternate Name principle, as well as the Dual Name principle in the case of commemorative names. We shall return to this issue in further detail in point 6.

5.2. Question: Are the 17 Ojibway Names written in standard roman orthography?

Answer: NO

Because of their incidence in cartography and in legislation, standardized orthographies are of paramount importance in any naming protocol. As only a few of Canada's Aboriginal languages have standardized writing systems, the Board wished to assure some measure of stability and consistency in the orthography of the proposed names. At the present time, there is no standardized orthography for the Ojibway language, which uses both roman and syllabic writing systems. The use of syllabics is widespread but not systematic while the roman alphabet has the advantage of being accessible to both Native and non-Native populations. In its proposal, the Pikangikum First Nation submitted its 17 names for approval in roman orthography and did not require that they also be approved in syllabic form. This was an encouraging point as the OGNB database is not currently able to handle syllabic characters.

In accordance with its own principles, the Board therefore required that the Band Council approve the spelling in roman orthography of each proposed name before submitting them for approval. The Band Council complied.

5.3. Question: Can the names be broken down in any way to assist non-First Nation users with recognition and pronunciation?

Answer: YES

This question dealt with an often raised delicate issue relating to the structure of Native toponyms. The geographical name matrix imported from Europe and then spread over the North American continent involves an onomastic compound normally divided into two elements: a generic (the word that identifies the type of geographic feature such as a *river*, an *island*, a *lake* etc.) and a specific (the name which is unique to that feature as in *Mississipp*i River, *Manitoulin* Island, Lake *Michigan* etc.). Native toponyms do not always follow this generic/specific model and are rather based on discourse or narratives. As a result, some names can be very long such as *Pekwachnamaykoskwaskwaypinwanik* (where one catches wild trout with hooks) or *Kuchistiniwamiskahikan* (island where canoes enter in the bay). In the officialization process, naming authorities have often treated these narratives as specifics and then added English or French generics in an effort to align the names with the generic/specific model, creating unusually long toponyms such as *Pekwachnamaykoskwaskwaypinwanik Lake* in Manitoba or *Île Kuchistiniwamiskahikan* in Québec. These forms are not only difficult to read but present serious challenges when they are entered into name databases or used on maps. The Board wanted to see if the proposed PFN names *per se* could be broken into generic and specific elements. Interestingly, some of the names followed the generic/specific model. For example, *chepahyeesahkaheekhan* can be written in two words: *chepahyee* (one pine) being the specific element of the name and *sahkaheekhan* (lake), being the generic element. In the Board's view, this presented novel opportunity to blend Native and European name traditions while, at the same time, reducing the length of the Aboriginal Name and making it easier to pronounce by non-Native speakers.

5.4. Question: Most components of Canadian toponyms begin with upper case letters. Could the previous example be written: <u>Chepahyee Sahkaheekhan</u>?

Answer: YES

Such standardization would not cause any concerns among the Pikangikum people and was accepted by the Board as another way to make Native names more easily recognizable by non-Native speakers and more consistent with Canadian writing standards.

5.5. Question: Would PFN object if an English generic were added to the Ojibway name, i.e. <u>Chepahyee Sahkaheekahn Lake</u> to assist non-First Nation users?

Answer: YES

In the minds of the PFN community, the addition of a non-Native generic would denature and compromise the Ojibway essence of the name. As well, it would confuse bilingual children learning both Ojibway and English who would perceive the *Lake* element as repetitive and redundant. The Board accepted the position of the PFN Council and decided against the addition of non-Native generics. In doing so, the Board was influenced by recent decisions taken by other toponymic authorities in the world, including New Zealand with regard to its Maori names and British Columbia with regard to its Nisga'a names. They are now approving Native toponyms based on their actual usage in the Native speech community, without adding any foreign elements. Although this solution might present challenges to non-Native speakers, it is more respectful of the cultural identity of First Nations. It will perhaps

take some time before it is generally accepted, but in the end, it will be another step forward and in keeping with the current trend, developed since the 1960s, to recognize Aboriginal toponymy in its essence and embrace the cultural diversity it represents.

In view of the responses to the questionnaire, the Board decided to consider the PFN names for adoption with separated elements (generic and specific) whenever possible, using upper case letters for each element and without the addition of English generics. As for orthography, the names would considered for adoption in the roman orthography, with spellings provided by the Pikangikum First Nation and endorsed by a Band Council Resolution before being submitted to the Minister of Natural Resources for approval. The use of syllabics is not considered at this time.

6. Applying the Alternate and Dual Name Principle

Having secured the necessary information concerning the written form of the proposed names, the Board then proceeded to discuss their status. As all the features in question had already been previously officially named, it had to be decided if the PFN names would have Alternate or Dual Name status. Let us briefly review the definition of both classes:

Alternate Name: A geographical name, in a different language than the official name, that is in local usage in a minority speech community. In keeping with the United Nations resolutions concerning the status of names in multi-lingual areas, these names are given *alternate official status with the official name* with the alternation being determined by specific contexts, namely mapping, prose-text applications and road signage. The previously discussed example of *Lake of the Woods – Lac des Bois* is a typical example of an alternate name.

Dual Name: A geographical name, in a different language than the official name, that is in usage in a minority speech community. In keeping with the United Nations resolutions concerning the status of names in multi-lingual areas, these names are given *equal official status with the official name* and are to be used at all times and in all contexts along with the official name, each name being separated by a slash bar. Ex: *Stoney Point / Pointe-aux-Roches,* a municipality in Southwestern Ontario.

As one can see, both the alternate and the dual name differ from the official name but only in the case of dual names are both forms to be used at all times and in all contexts. The alternate name has an on/off switch, so to speak, that is activated depending on the context. If, for example, the scale of a map does not allow it to be used in bracketed form with the official name, then it cannot be used. Both dual and alternate names have official status and require ministerial approval.

After studying each case individually, the Board concluded that in dealing with the PFN names, it would apply both the Alternate and Dual name principles depending on the level of usage and relevance of the current official name in the First Nation area. There are three possible options:

a) When the official name and PFN name are currently being used by both the Native and non-Native speech communities, OGNB will be applying the Dual Name model with precedence being given to the PFN name. Ex: *Pahkayyahkahmahk / Silcox Lake.* This is the case especially when the official name is the result of a commemoration in honour of a war casualty or someone who has made a significant contribution to the province or the country. In the example provided, *Silcox Lake* was named in commemoration of Pilot Officer John

James Wilcox, Royal Canadian Air Force, who served with the 162 (R.A.F.) Squadron and was killed in active service on November 4, 1942.

b) When the official name is currently being used by the non-Native minority speech community, OGNB will be applying the Alternate Name model, giving official status to the PFN name and alternate name status to the current official name. Ex. The current official name *Upper Goose Lake* will become an alternate name while the PFN name for the feature *Keechenekee Sahkahheekahn* will become the official name. The alternation will be determined by the context, as explained earlier for French Alternate names. This option gives precedence to the Aboriginal form while preserving the integrity of the former official name.

c) When no official name exists for a given feature, OGNB will be recommending that official status be given to PFN names in roman orthography, with separated and capitalized elements to facilitate recognition and pronunciation. Foreign generics will not be added.

On March 8, 2010, OGNB recommended that all 17 PFN names, written in roman orthography and approved by a PFN Band Council Resolution, be approved by the Minister of Natural Resources. At the present time, consultations are continuing with other interested parties in the area, such as outfitters, recreational associations and surrounding local municipalities.

7. Conclusion

The Board believes that having engaged in an exchange of points of view with the Native community has lead to an enhanced appreciation of Aboriginal names and a better understanding of the contribution of First Nations to the geographical naming process in Ontario. The adoption of the Pikangikum names opens the door to further recognition of Aboriginal names in northern Ontario and elsewhere in the province. This initiative, as pointed out earlier, is in keeping with similar efforts being taken throughout the world aiming to recognize and disseminate Aboriginal names on maps, in prose text applications and road signage as well as in new geo-referencing technologies and geomatic applications.

The Ontario initiative provides a high level of integrity of First Nation names. It respects local usage and does not add foreign generics to the Aboriginal name. At the same time, it assures a high level of integrity of previously approved non-Native names through the use of dual or alternate naming. It also provides a high level of readability through the use of roman orthography and word separation. More importantly, this approach embraces dynamic diversity and constitutes a significant contribution to the survival of First Nation languages in North America.

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