



Polyonymy of Geographical Objects – Cultural Wealth and a Cartographic Challenge

Josip FARIČIĆ

University of Zadar, Department of Geography, Franje Tuđmana 24 1, 23000 Zadar, Croatia
jfaricic@unizd.hr

Abstract

Many geographical objects have more than one name. This is the consequence of being given names by people from different language groups, whether completely different, or variants of the same language, including dialects and local speech patterns. Polyonymy often occurs when a geographical feature extends across several regions or countries and is given different names, sometimes written in different scripts. Also, it is common in border areas, particular those which have belonged in the past to various political entities. Even a minor language group may have different names for the same object, depending on its use in different contexts (for example, the islet of Sikica/Pinizelić/Tovar/Tovarnjak in the Kornati Islands).

Regardless of the reasons for polyonymy, it reveals a certain cultural wealth. Geographical names are part of cultural heritage, and often reflect linguistic layers created over many centuries. For example, they may indicate the multi-ethnicity of an area, reflecting its multicultural significance. However, they may also pose problems if a particular name is insisted upon in order to impose a specific political agenda, especially in terms of exonyms and endonyms. Problems may also arise when the standard form of a geographical names differs from that used by the local population.

On printed maps, it is often impossible to give all the variations of names of geographical objects, as there is not enough space and the aesthetics of the cartographic depiction would be spoiled. If one name must be selected, the choice must be based on relevant arguments. The issue, however, is whether geographers and geodesists are sufficiently competent to make independent choices which will be accepted by the wider academic community. This is easier when naming geographical objects on digital maps, and particularly on electronic maps which function as systems with the possibility of linking different media. In these systems, it is possible to add several name variants (for example, in a drop-down menu) and link them with an audio recording of the pronunciation and appropriate inflection. In this case, the 'only' remaining problem is the order in which the names appear.

Entering geographical names should preferably be preceded by collaboration between experts in different scientific disciplines, primarily linguists, geodesists and geographers. This is particularly important where official cartography is concerned (cadastral plans, topographic maps, charts) which forms the basis for the production of various thematic maps.

Keywords: cartography, map, geographical names