

# IMPLEMENTING LANGUAGE POLICIES: THE STANDARDIZATION AND TRANSLITERATION OF TOPONYMS IN CYPRUS

Andreas Papapavlou

UNIVERSITY OF CYPRUS

## Περίληψη

Η τυποποίηση και η μεταγραφή τοπωνυμίων είναι δύο σημαντικές, ωστόσο διαφορετικές μεταξύ τους έννοιες όσον αφορά τους τομείς της γλωσσικής πολιτικής και του γλωσσικού σχεδιασμού. Το παρόν άρθρο αποσκοπεί στο: α) να καταδείξει τις διαφορές μεταξύ τυποποίησης και μεταγραφής, β) να προσδιορίσει τους στόχους και τη χρήση των συστημάτων μεταγραφής που εφαρμόζονται για τα γεωγραφικά ονόματα, γ) να διερευνήσει το σύστημα μεταγραφής που χρησιμοποιείται σε Ελλάδα και Κύπρο (ΕΛΟΤ 743), δ) να προτείνει τρόπους βελτίωσης του συστήματος ώστε αυτό να καταστεί πιο συνεπές και αποτελεσματικό, και ε) να εκτιμήσει τα προβλήματα που έχουν προκύψει κατά την τυποποίηση και μεταγραφή τοπωνυμίων στην Κύπρο. Σε ότι αφορά αυτόν τον τελευταίο στόχο, πρόθεση δεν είναι να ασκηθεί κριτική επί του συνολικού έργου που έχει παραχθεί από την αντίστοιχη επιτροπή αλλά να έρθουν στην επιφάνεια συγκεκριμένα προβλήματα που αξίζουν περαιτέρω διερεύνησης και προσοχής.

## Keywords

language policy and planning, standardization, transliteration, romanization.

## Aims of the study

Standardization and transliteration (romanization) of toponyms are two important, yet different concepts in the area of language policy and language planning. This paper attempts to: (a) make explicit the differences between standardization and transliteration, (b) identify the purposes and use of transliteration conversion systems for geographical names, (c) examine the ΕΛΟΤ 743 romanization system used in Greece and in Cyprus, (d) provide some suggestions for the 'improvement' of this system that would make it more consistent and more efficient, and (e) assess the problems that arose in the standardization and transliteration of place names in Cyprus. In assessing the problems that arose in the standardization and transliteration of place names in Cyprus, the intention is not to criticize the entire work that was accomplished by the appropriate committee but rather to bring to the surface certain problems that merit further examination and careful consideration.

### (A) Distinction between standardization and transliteration.

Standardization results from the natural, diachronic development and selection of one particular variety of a given language as the standard 'official' one or it may result from human intervention (by Language Academies or other official bodies). In some cases, it can be the result of both processes (for details on issues related to standardization of languages see Kaplan and Baldauf, 1997; Milroy and Milroy, 1991; Schiffman, 1998). However, in the case of

geographical names, standardization is always the result of human intervention where a supreme authority (such as the UN) sets the criteria and guidelines for standardization.

A distinction between *standardization* and *transliteration* is necessary in this paper. *Standardization* is a consistent and uniform use of place names and it is an essential element of effective communication worldwide. Standardization is necessary for various reasons. For example, imagine the obstacles entailed by expanding a product or service into a country that uses an alphabet other than a Roman alphabet and has many locations referred to by several names in different languages. Standardization helps to reduce the confusion that can result when many variations are used interchangeably within a language and across different languages used in the same country (from the brochure produced by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names - UNGEGN). According to UNGEGN, the correct use of accurate place names can provide benefits to local, national and international communities engaged in many activities such as trade and commerce, property rights, environmental management, map and atlas production, tourism and communications including postal and news services. The UN defines a *geographical name* as “a name applied to a feature on the surface of the earth; a particular case of a topographic name or toponym”.

Who then is authorized to carry out the standardization and transliteration of toponyms in every country? Two resolutions of the appropriate UN committees (1977, 1982) stipulate that the entire responsibility for the management of the standardization and transliteration of geographical names lies solely in the *competent authority* of each country and no other body.

In Greece there is no governmental agency for the centralized function of collection, registration and standardization of all the types of geographical names. However, according to the type of toponym (inhabited places, geographical features, etc), standardization is accomplished by the work of a number of different authorities and coordinating bodies. This practice has been in effect since the early 1960's. In July 1997, a *Working Group* was established for the coordination of the Standardization of Geographical Names in Greece. It consists of representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Interior and governmental cartographic organizations.

The competent authority in Cyprus is the *Cyprus Permanent Committee for the Standardization of Geographical Names (CPCSGN)*. Initially this was an ad-hoc committee. As early as 1962, it took part in the First International Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names under the auspices of the UN. The committee, in its present form, was established and ratified by the Council of Ministers in 1977 and it is a member of the UN International Standardization Organization (ISO). The ten-member committee, from several sectors of the Cypriot society, is governed by statutes and laws approved by the Parliament and ratified by the Government in 1998 (the most recent amended law was ratified in November 2001, N. 146(I)). Since its establishment, the committee has accomplished a significant part of its mandate, which includes the compilation of the Complete Toponymic Gazetteer of Cyprus (with 67.000 place names), ratified by the Government of Cyprus and approved by the UN in 1987. This Gazetteer is the only internationally recognized document of Cypriot toponyms, and as such, it safeguards any attempts from alteration or forgery.

The standardization process is accomplished as follows: The appropriate committee chooses from the existing (available) forms (or varieties) of a given place name only *one* for official and international use. The choice of the correct (accepted) type should be based on *linguistic, grammatical, aesthetic, social* and *historical* factors. The committee is not at liberty to 'alter', or 'modify' place names. Whereas the standardization is essential and obligatory for *all* languages, transliteration is only necessary for languages that do not use the Latin alphabet. Unlike transliteration, standardization is a sensitive and delicate issue as place names can identify and reflect culture, heritage and landscape. Such factors have always been a source of major frictions among and between nations for many years.

**(B) Transliteration (romanization) systems.**

A transliteration (romanization) system is a system that converts the standardized (accepted) written form of a place name into Roman characters. It is an arbitrary, conventional and mechanical (computerized) system of converting letters from one form into another (Latin). The use of a transliteration system is not necessary for all languages. The transliteration of geographical names into Roman characters concerns only those countries where the Roman alphabet is not used in the writing system of the languages used in those countries (e.g., Chinese, Slavic, Greek, Arabic, Hebrew, etc.). For example, the English and Turkish languages do not need to employ a transliteration system. Countries using non-Roman writing systems propose transcription systems (in the form of a resolution) to the UN for approval. Thus far, the UN approved and adopted 28 transliteration systems for 28 languages; another 19 transliterations are still pending.

Transliteration systems are based on two binding principles that are laid down by the UN: (a) all transliteration systems must be based on the *official* languages of each state and (b) dialects cannot be used as a basis for transliteration. Countries using the same language must use the same transliteration system. For example, the Arabic language is used, with slight variations (e.g., phonetic, morphological, etc.) in over 20 countries but all these countries must use the *same* transliteration system. The UN provides three other guidelines to make transliteration systems more accurate: (a) The system should be reversible, i.e. it should be possible to reconstruct the non-Roman script form on the basis of romanization, (b) the system should be as simple to use as possible. It would not be to the advantage of the system if one should consult dictionaries to get a correct romanization of names, and (c) the romanized name forms should be as easy as possible to write, read, memorize and store electronically. That would mean the minimization of the use of diacritical marks, avoiding difficult and unusual character sequences, etc.

Through the joint efforts of the appropriate committees in Greece and Cyprus, the EAOT Romanization system (known as ISO 843.3) was developed. It is an international conversion system of geographical names and is applied consistently within the boundaries of the Greek State and Cyprus. This system is used for maps and street signs, thus functioning as a useful system for foreign visitors.

The EAOT 743 Romanization system was adopted as the international standard for the conversion of geographical names in 1987, during the Fifth Conference of the United Nations for the Standardization of Geographic Names. In Cyprus, the EAOT 743 Romanization system was adopted by the Council of Ministers in 1988 (article 31.075 dated 15/ 12/ 1988). The EAOT 743 system provides for two sets of rules for both transcription and transliteration of Greek characters into Latin characters. It also provides for a reversible transcription. Reversibility is achieved by adding diacritical signs in case where ambiguities might arise.

All transliteration systems must be based on the *official* language or languages of each state. According to the Constitution of the Republic of Cyprus (article 3), the official languages are Greek and Turkish. As to which variety of Greek should be used, the Council of Ministers declared (article 17,609 dated 15/ 01/ 1979) that the language for public use is the *Pan-Hellenic demotic* (previous to this date, the language used was the '*katharevousa*'). For Turkish, no special provisions have been made for its transliteration as it uses the Roman alphabet.

The implementation of ISO 843.3 is *binding* on all government service organizations as well as semi-governmental organizations of the Republic of Cyprus. For private use, scholars, writers, and private organizations are not obligated to use this system and may employ any transliteration system they wish. However, it is *advisable* that they use the official transliteration system for purposes of uniformity.

As stated earlier, the UN does not permit the use of a phonetic transcription for the transliteration of place names. This restriction presents certain *disadvantages* for languages that do not use the Roman alphabet over those languages that do. One of these problems is related to dialectal representation. An example from Italian would be useful. The place name 'Plasa' in northern Italy is represented correctly as [Plasa] and this is the way it is represented on maps or street signs. In other parts of Italy, let us say Sicily, a town with the name 'Plasa' is similarly represented on the billboard as [Plasa], but this does not prevent a Sicilian from reading the same sign as /Plaza/, a person from Palermo as /Platsa/, and for another person (from another part of Italy) as /Platfa/. That is, the sounds /z/, /ts/ and /tʃ/ are allophonic variations of /s/. Therefore, since for Italian there is no need to go through the process of transliteration, the problem of dialectal representation of a given toponym is not brought to surface.

### **(C) Problems and inconsistencies identified with the EAOT 743 system.**

The problems and inconsistencies of this system fall into the following four categories:

(i) *It uses identical symbols for different Greek letters.*

The EAOT romanization system transcribes the two Greek letters ita-ἵττα (H,η) and yiota- γιώτα (I,ι) into one single symbol, that of /i/. It also transcribes the two Greek letters omicron-ὀμικρον (O,ο) and omega-ὠμέγα (Ω,ω) into one single symbol, that of /o/. That is, no distinction is made between these two sets of letters.

(ii) *It allows for a phonetic representation of some letter combinations.*

The EAOT romanization system transcribes the Greek diphthong AY, αυ into /AV, av/ or /AF, af/ depending on the phonetic environment. It does the same of the diphthong EY, ευ. It represents this diphthong as /EV, ev/ or /Ef, ef/ depending on the phonetic environment.

(iii) *It represents double consonants (affricates) inconsistently.*

The Greek language has two double consonants Ξ, ξ [ks] and Ψ, ψ [ps] that are represented by a single symbol in Greek. The EAOT system represents the double consonant Ξ, ξ with a single symbol (X, x) and the other double consonant Ψ, ψ with a double symbol (PS, Ps). No phonetic or phonological reason is provided for this decision.

(iv) *It represents some single consonants inconsistently.*

The two Greek single letters Χ, χ and Θ, θ are represented by a single symbol in Greek but the EAOT system represents them both with double symbols; CH, ch and TH, th respectively. While the letter Θ, θ must be represented by / TH, th/ , the letter Χ, χ can be easily represented by the letter /H, h/.

#### **(D) Recommendations for the ‘improvement’ of the existing EAOT system**

(i) *the use of the historical spelling of Greek in the conversion should be abolished*

1. All six symbols (or combinations of symbols) representing the sound / i/ (that is, Η η, Ι ι, Υ υ, ΟΙ οι, ΕΙ ει, ΥΙ υι) should be represented with the symbol /i/.

2. The two symbols representing the sound / o/ (that is, Ο ο, Ω ω) should be represented with the symbol /o/ (as it appears in the system).

3. The two symbols (or combinations of symbols) representing the sound / e/ (that is, Ε ε, ΑΙ αι) should be represented with the symbol /e/.

4. The combination of letters (diphthong) representing the sound / u/ (that is, ΟΥ ου) should be represented with the single symbol /u/.

(ii) *the use of phonetic representation of letter combinations should be adopted*

Phonetic representation for some letter combinations is already used in the adopted system (for example with αυ and εϋ). Another example where the use of phonetic principles is applied is the letter combination ΜΠ/ μπ. It is some times represented as B, b and in others as MP, mp.

#### **(E) Problems for the acceptance of a revised transliteration system**

The difficulty in adopting the suggestions in item i (see above) is that of *reversibility*. This is a particularly significant problem, however it is a technical problem that can be managed effectively with the application of simple computer programming techniques.

It has to be said that the acceptance of a revised version of the adopted EAOT transliteration system is not easy for several reasons. Firstly, this system has been in place for the last fifteen years and it is used in Greece, Cyprus and in many European Union and UN agencies. Secondly, any changes to the system will bring about confusion and financial burdens. Although a revised version may not be easily implemented, it is imperative that the concerned authorities should be made aware that *alternative* systems could be made available, if needed. These systems can provide equally valid conversion systems that could be possibly more 'acceptable' to the general public and easier for foreign visitors to use.

## **(F) Discussion of relevant issues to the Cyprus context**

The issues of *standardization*, the non-use of *dialects* for standardization, the non-use of *phonetic* representation, and what is considered as the *official* language for public use are internationally recognized as involving very complicated issues. These are particularly pertinent to the Cypriot context (especially the exclusion of the Cypriot dialect), and as such, further discussion and clarification is needed.

As stated earlier, standardization is achieved by choosing from the existing varieties of a given place name only *one* for official and international use. The selection of the *one* standard form for official use is accomplished by applying a set of *linguistic, grammatical, aesthetic, social* and *historical* criteria. The above explication can help in assessing whether the Cyprus Permanent Committee followed the above rule. Let us examine two examples of place names that became the focus of much debate in the local press, radio programs and talkshows in the mid 1990's. The first place is known by a variety of names such as Λατσά [Latʃa], Λατσσιά [Latʃia], Λακσιά [Laksia], Λακκιά [Lakkia], and the second is known as Αγλαντζιά [Aglandʒa], Αγλανκιά [Aglankia], Αγλακιά [Aglakia], Αγλαγγιά [Aglaggia]. Following the rules laid down by the UN, the committee chose the last version in both cases as the standard 'correct' form, that is Λακκιά [Lakkia] and Αγλαγγιά [Aglaggia], and rejected the other three choices as being either dialectal variations of the standard 'original' form or as variations that are not part of the 'official' language (i.e. Pan-Hellenic demotic). The committee justifies its decision with reference to its mandate to treat 'official' language forms and avoid the use of dialectal variations. As for the transliteration of these two places, the matter is quite simple: the EΛOT 743 Romanization system converts the names of Λακκιά and Αγλαγγιά into [Lakkia] and [Aglaggia] respectively. Since the committee acted lawfully in following the UN directives, one might ask why the fuss and turmoil about these two names. There are several possible explanations that may clarify the various reactions. These are:

### *(i) Disagreement among the members of the committee*

Firstly, there was disagreement among the members of the committee about the interpretation of the criteria. That is, the decision with reference to the two above-named places (as well as for many other places) was not a unanimous one. It is of interest to note that those who had different 'views' from the majority of the committee were those of the linguists (university professors) serving on the committee. While two of these linguists presented their arguments and submitted their suggestions to the committee in writing (November 25<sup>th</sup>, 1997), these were rejected. The present writer, a linguist himself, was not a member of the committee at the time; had he been on the committee, his choices for the names of certain places would have also been with those of the other two linguists. Several questions come to mind: Why do the linguists understand and 'interpret' standardization and its use differently from non-linguists on the committee? Are they motivated by ideologies other than those of the other members?

### *(ii) Problems with the committee's interpretation of the official language*

Secondly, it is possible that the committee's interpretation of the 'official' language for standardization is a 'distorted' one. The Republic of Cyprus has been using the *non-official* (dialectal) forms of place names (not exclusively to the above-mentioned places) for many years in the *official* correspondences with these places (before and after the 'declaration' of Pan-Hellenic demotic as the official language of the Republic in 1979 - article 17,609, dated 15/ 01/ 1979). Numerous official documents can be presented in support of this practice. Also the government has adopted these place names in its geography curriculum (after 1979). Has the government been acting 'illegally' all these years?

The government's declaration of Pan-Hellenic demotic as the language for official use was likely intended for use in *education* (at all levels) and for *administrative* purposes; that is, for instruction in schools, for correspondence between the various governmental departments and with the general public. It is of interest to note that in all these years, *no* Cypriot was ever prosecuted for writing to the government in the Cypriot dialect, or for calling himself 'Ttofis' (instead of Christofis) and his wife 'Marikkou' (instead of Maria) or for referring to his place of birth as 'Dzerinia' (instead of Κερύνεια - Keryneia). It may be argued here that the declaration of the 'official' language was not intended for place names but rather for declaring demotic Greek, rather than '*katharevousa*', as the official language of the Republic of Cyprus.

*(iii) The Council of Ministers' decision on suggested place names*

Thirdly, while the Council of Ministers declared Pan-Hellenic demotic as the official language of the Republic in 1979 and adopted the ΕΛΟΤ 743 system in 1988, the Council of Ministers itself did not fully accept the recommendations made by the CPCSGN committee with reference to certain place names. Rather, the Council instead adopted the "double representation" of names. For example, the Council suggested that the place names of Λακκιά [Lakkia] and Αγλανγγιά [Aglanggia] should also be represented on road signs as Latsia and Aglandjia. Was the Council, by this very action, giving recognition and acceptance to the dialectal representations of these two place names? Furthermore, since UN directives do not recommend the 'double representation' of names, was the Council of Ministers acting unlawfully? Also, the Council of Ministers did not stop with the adoption of the *dialectal* representation of certain place names. It also went further by adopting the method of 'double representation' for two major towns of Cyprus, Lefkosia and Lemesos by accepting their representation on road signs with their familiar and well-known Anglicized names of Nicosia and Limassol.

*(iv) How far back in history?*

Fourthly, when a committee is searching for the proper or standard form of a place name and needs to use the criterion of history, how far back in history is the committee willing to go? Would it be willing to go as far back as to the pre-Hellenic days of Cyprus? Let us examine a well-known historical site that goes as far back as 9000 years and which is known, nowadays, as Χοιροκοιτία [Choirokoitia]. This specific place name, which was also the occasion for much controversy in the local press, can be found in various texts (mainly historical) as either "Khirokitia", or "Heroquitia" (found in Latin documents from the Templar trial of the early 14<sup>th</sup>

century), or “Chierochithia”, or “Chierochitia”, or “Chirochitia” (in Italian chronicles by Amadi, Strambaldi, Bustron as attested by Dr. Schabel, in the Cyprus Weekly, December 8, 2000).

What should the standard name of this place be? According to the committee, the accepted proper name should be Choirokoitia based on how the name appears orthographically in Greek [Χοιροκοιτία]. The adoption of Χοιροκοιτία however, does not tell us much about the meaning of the origin of the place (the original name of this Neolithic site is unknown). An internationally known archaeologist and the former Director of the Cyprus Antiquities Department had the following to say about this issue: “Toponyms of archaeological sites have a rich and ancient tradition, not to mention extensive bibliography during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They must certainly remain as they are with no changes” (Cyprus Weekly, 09/ 02/ 2001).

*(v) The use of etymology as a criterion for selecting official names*

Fifthly, the UN directives do not suggest the use of etymology as one of the principles for standardization purposes, however the committee repeatedly used etymology for the selection of the standard ‘official’ place names. The committee takes the term linguistic to be synonymous with etymology but many experts would attest that a linguistic criterion could not always be equated with an etymological criterion. Also, it is widely known that the etymological explanation of terms in any language is not always accurate and it cannot be always verified scientifically. There are quite a few examples of places names that have been selected as proper names on the basis of doubtful or uncertain etymology. For example, the place name Ανόγυρα [Anogyra], according to the committee, should be Ανώγυρα (because it derives from Άνω [upper] + γύρος [circle]), Ανδρολύκου [Androlykou] should be Ανδρολικού [Androlikou] (because it does not derive from Άνδρος + λύκος but rather from Άνδρος + νίκος where the [v] changed into [λ]), Αναφωτία [Anafotia] should be Αναφωτίδα [Anafotida] as the name comes from φώς (light) and not φωτιά (fire). These, of course, are just some examples of place names that were selected on etymological grounds but there are additional place names whose etymologies are debatable (see Karyoleμου, 2002).

*(vi) Inconsistency in applying the requisite principles of naming*

Sixthly, the committee did not observe the use of dialectal place names consistently. When a place name is dialectal but its orthographic representation is ‘acceptable’ and its pronunciation does not violate the phonological representation of Standard Modern Greek (i.e., it does not contain sounds or sound combinations that are ‘unacceptable’ in Greek) the committee is ‘lenient’ and ready to make ‘concessions’. One example of such place name is that of Αργάκι or Αρκάκι. According to the committee the name Αρκάκι comes from Αργάκι and this derives from the Greek word Ρυάκι (creek). Thus, the accepted ‘proper’ Greek name should actually be Ρυάκι [Ryakin] but the committee is willing to accept (the dialectal) Αργάκι [Argaki].

There are many other place names that can be classified as dialectal (i.e., their names do not derive from a Greek root). Yet, these names are accepted by the committee as standard official names because they do not contain non-Greek (i.e., dialectal) sounds such as /dʒ/, /ʃ/, /tʃ/, /z/. Some examples of other dialectal place names that are selected to be the standard



(official) names include: Alaminos, Belapais, Choulou, Flasou, Filani, Fikardou, Kaziverara, Kazafani, Masari, Malounta, Mammari, Maroni, Mitsero, Lara, and Tseri.

*(vii) Public sensitivities*

Seventhly, since place names “can identify and reflect culture, heritage and landscape” (UN official words), then one would expect that people’s feelings and sensitivities about place names should be taken into consideration in the standardization process. Experts in matters related to language policy and language planning normally adopt this practice. The committee however was unwilling to consider peoples’ feelings and views and thus ignored one of the five official criteria (that is, the ‘social’ one). The sensitivities over place names are not just those of ‘simple’ folk and the ‘uneducated’ masses. A well-known ex-MP, and a long-standing member of the House Education Committee, was vehemently opposed to the changes proposed by the committee. He had the following to say about the changes of names in Cyprus: “This is unheard of. Conversion to Modern Greek of the Cypriot toponyms will only distort them and create confusion. Our toponyms are steeped in ancient tradition and antiquity and as a result, they must be left as they are”. The ex-MP continues by stating “The history of many of our villages is shown clearly through these toponyms, which are part of our Cypriot language and heritage, and, therefore must be kept as such” (Cyprus Weekly, 09/ 02/ 2001).

**(G) Concluding remarks**

As we have already seen, at least seven problems were identified in implementing the standardization and transliteration of geographical names in Cyprus. The aim of this paper however is not to criticize the work that was accomplished by the Permanent Committee but rather to bring to surface the numerous difficulties that exist in carrying out the arduous task of standardization, in implementing UN directives and in respecting public sensitivities. As it can be seen, much more research is still needed in this area before any sound recommendations are put forward to the concerned authorities for consideration.

**References**

- Kaplan, Robert & Baldauf, B.R. 1997. *Language planning. From practice to theory*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters 108.
- Karyolemou, Marilena 2002. «Γλωσσική τυποποίηση και ταυτότητα: Τα Γεωγραφικά ονόματα της Κύπρου». *Studies in Greek Linguistics* 22, 300-310.
- Milroy, James & Milroy, Leslie 1991. *Authority in language. Investigating language prescription and standardization*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Schiffman, Harold 1998. “Standardization and restandardization. The case of “Standard” Spoken Tamil.” *Language in Society* 27, 359-385.

This document was created with Win2PDF available at <http://www.daneprairie.com>.  
The unregistered version of Win2PDF is for evaluation or non-commercial use only.