Minutes of the meeting on Persian Romanization

Time: 25 April 2012, 9:00-11.30.

Location: Olympic Hotel, Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran

Present: Dr. Yadollah Parmoun (Coordinator of Transcription Working Group, Iranian Committee on the Standardization of Geographical Names; Iranian Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization), Eng. Gholamreza Karimzadeh (Secretary, Iranian Committee on the Standardization of Geographical Names; National Cartographic Centre of Iran), Mr. Abolfazl Bolandian (Member, Iranian Committee on the Standardization of Geographical Names; National Cartographic Centre of Iran); Dr. Peeter Päll (Convenor, UNGEGN Working Group on Romanization Systems).

The meeting was arranged to discuss the points raised in the letter of the UNGEGN Working Group on Romanization Systems (WGRS) to the Iranian National Committee on the Standardization of Geographical Names (18 April 2012). Iranian experts clarified their position as regards the choice of the romanization method and specific romanization equivalents.

A general remark by Dr. Parmoun concerned the nature of the current Persian writing system. Although it is based on Arabic script, it relates to an Indo-European language which has a totally different phonological structure than Arabic as a member of the fundamentally different Semitic family, and although the Persian language has many Arabic loanwords, its phonetic structure is nevertheless not at all influenced by Arabic. This has resulted in a writing system where there are no one-to-one correspondences between some sounds and letters:

- There are letters that correspond to more than one sound, e.g. the letter و can represent either /u/, /o/ or /v/;

- There are sounds that correspond to more than one letter, e.g. the sound /z/ is represented by ز, ذ, ض, or ظ.

- Half of the vowel sounds of Persian (three out of six), i.e. /a/, /e/, and /o/ are not, normally represented in writing, giving rise to a variety of different readings of a simple string such as کتک.

The fact the one sound may be expressed by different Persian characters is a source of confusion for Iranians as well. For example, it is not clear why some names, like اصفهان (Eşfahān[1]) or آذربایجان (Āẕarbāyjān) should contain (the etymologically incorrect Arabic)

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[1] For clarity, Persian examples here are followed by transliteration (= the current UN romanization on Persian), followed, if needed, by broad transcription after a slash.

letters ص and ذ, which have never been part of these words. Even the name of the capital تهران (Tehrān) is sometimes written طهران (Ṭehrān). As for non-names, the word for 'ticket' is another example which can be written either as بلیط or بلیت. Therefore, what matters more, is the standard pronunciation of names.

Furthermore, such mistaken renderings have resulted in a wrong registration of geographical names, and, following that, in losing their historical identity. A prominent example is the written form of the name Aşgabat, today's capital of Turkmenistan. In the contemporary Persian orthography it is written as عشق آباد ('Eshqābād 'city of love'), and not as اشغ آباد ('Ashghābād, 'the city established by Parthians') with the correct etymology. Other examples of mistaken renderings of Iranian geographical names under the influence of Arabic include مندجین (Gorgān), گرگان (Jorjān) for جرجان (Būmūsā), بوموسا (Abūmūsá) for ابوموسی (Mendejīn) for مندگین (Mendegīn), دستجرد (Dastjerd) for دستگرد (Dastgerd), بهرامجرد (Bahrāmjerd) for بهرامکرد (Bahrāmkard), عراق ('Irāq) for اراک ('Arāk).

The points raised in the letter of the WGRS may be divided into three groups:

A) specific romanization equivalents;

B) reversibility;

C) implementation.

A.

As to the specific romanization equivalents, Iranian experts agreed – as expressed already in an earlier letter to the WGRS – that the letter **ʔ** may be substituted by the apostrophe ('). Also, names should begin with a capital letter. There was some discussion about the letter **ǰ** which was originally invented to represent a sound opposed to the unvoiced sound **č** in a systematic manner. However, it was agreed that for practical reasons (availability in most frequent character sets) it could be substituted by **j**. (This simplification had already been implemented in the Iranian National Geographical Names Database together with initial capital letters.)

There was also discussion on some other romanization equivalents, not raised in the WGRS letter. For instance, Iranian experts considered it preferable to use **ow** instead of **ou**, because instead of diphthongs, one should speak of the combination of a vowel and the glide (**ay**, **ey**, **uy**, **ow**, etc.). Also, experts mentioned that the various symbols used for different manifestations of the vowel sound **ā** (including **á**, **å**) were not understood by the native speakers of Persian, since they have been invented under the influence of the Arabic writing system. Finally, as vowel length is not distinctive in Persian and does not change meaning, also as Persian uses only six different vowel qualities, experts concluded that using a macron on **u** and **i** (respectively, **ū** and **ī**) was not justifiable and logical. The choice of the symbol **ā** for the open back unrounded vowel of Persian has merely been made as a means of avoiding confusion with the symbol **a** which represents the open front unrounded vowel in Persian.

Regarding the choice of one-character equivalents (**č**, **š**, **ž**, **x**) *versus* digraph equivalents (**ch**, **sh**, **zh**, **kh**) preference was given to the former ones, because

1) it conforms to the principle one character = one sound,

2) it avoids some ambiguities, for instance, **kh** may in some names also denote two sounds, **k** + **h**; (e.g. علی آباد ترکها ʻAlīābād-e Torkhā), **zh** may denote **z** + **h** (بزّازها Bazzāzhā), etc.; such examples may be wrongly interpreted (e.g. علی آباد ترخا /Aliābād-e Torxā/ or بزّازا /Bazzāžā/, respectively),

3) romanized names and words become more compact and easy to read, cf. بشّاش Bashshāsh/Baššāš, فخّارمحلّه Fakhkhār Mahalleh/Faxxār Mahalle, بغبغو Baghbaghū/Baqbaqu, شش مخزن Sheshcheshmeh/Šeščešme, شش چشمه Sheshmakhzan/Šešmaxzan, چهل چشمه Chehelcheshmeh/Čehelčešme, چیچکلو Chīchaklū/Čičaklu, چی چست Chīchest/Čičest.

Due to the fact that Persian applies consonant gemination, as well as various other phonotactic combinations with consonants, the examples under (2) and (3) above are quite numerous.

B.

As regards reversibility or the use of transliteration, Iranian experts stated that transliteration had an artificial, complex character and therefore would not work reasonably for the Iranian people. It had not been used in modern Iranian maps and other cartographic products. Besides, transliteration would not help non-Iranians either, because in order to reconstruct the original script forms they would have to have at least some knowledge of Persian. For instance, the transliteration Barkhār is normally written by non-Iranians as برخار, whereas the correct spelling is برخوار. Also, the transliteration Kabūtarkhān that can be represented as کبوترکهان, کبوترخوان, or کبوترخان, has been registered in Persian both in the second and the third forms to refer to different geographical names.

On the other hand, broad transcription had well served the interests of standardizing the Iranian geographical names, was understood by different state authorities, and had not raised any misunderstandings.

As currently geographical names are widely available both in their romanized form and the original Persian spelling through the Iranian National Geographical Names Database (INGNDB), there should be no difficulty in obtaining the original forms of geographical names expressed in transcription.

However, it was recognized that the romanization system needs to be presented as based on the written form of a language. Therefore, future presentations of the system will be given with Persian script characters first in their traditional order, followed by their romanization equivalents.

C.

Regarding the question of implementation, it was stated that the broad transcription system had been implemented in the Iranian National Geographical Names Database (INGNDB, http://geonames.ncc.org.ir/HomePage.aspx?TabID=4572&Site=geonames.ncc.org&Lang=fa-IR) with about 120,000 records which is available online. Before the Tenth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, also a map would be published with romanized names.

At the end of the meeting Iranian experts reminded that Iran is not the first country that intends to substitute the current romanization system with a more adequate one.