

## RESEARCH REPORTS

### Slovak geographical names and the translation traps

#### *Abstract*

The role of English has increased in the recent years more than ever before. Effective mastering of the language, the ability to publish and lecture in it is very topical for the academicians. Geography-related texts are typical of using the **geographical names – geonames** or place names the translation of which has many imperfections. It is therefore necessary to adopt basic procedures in translating the geographical names. The paper gives the brief introductory to geographical names, points at how Slovak geographical names were found to be translated in geographical texts and finally, proposes or discusses standardised forms of some Slovak geonames.

*Key words:* geonym, geographical names, standardisation, translation, Slovakia

#### *Introduction*

The English language is widely spoken international language. It has become the working language at the conferences, congresses, research projects not only in foreign countries but also in homeland non-English institutions. In terms of scientific research at universities, the outreach of research findings abroad is higher provided they are published in a foreign, most commonly English language.

Traditional understanding of mastering the language includes two receptive competences (reading and listening) and two productive competences (writing and speaking). Wrede (2005) considers translation the fifth competence inevitable for transfer the information from the source language (SL) to the target language (TL). According to linguists

translation process can be described as decoding the meaning of the source text, and re-encoding or translating this meaning in the target language. Translation covers not literal (word by word) translation but also many other factors depending on the concepts of languages. The bigger the gap between the SL and the TL, the more difficult the process of transfer will be.

A good translation is (Wrede 2000):

- grammatically correct;
- communicative;
- interculturally understandable.

It is such a kind of interdisciplinary field of research, where besides geographers, linguists, cartographers, historians and other are involved.

#### *Geographical names – geonames*

English has revolutionized in geographical works as well. Production of academic texts written in English by Slovak geographers has considerably risen in recent years. Geographical texts are typical of using **geographical names – geonames** the translation of which has many imperfections. Many times, the translations of geographical texts include mistakes and are inaccurate. We decided to deal with translating the geographical names from the Slovak language to the English language so that we see how the translations can be misleading.

Up to now, there have been only few materials concerning the translation of geonames from Slovak to English. The handbook on academic English for geophysicians and geologists by Pašteka, Dugovičová (1998), the scriptum for the students of public administration by Cihová et al. (2005) become the good inspiration. There are many secondary school internal materials (geographical dictionaries, maturity leave handbook) not publicly published that we have come across

during the research. Geographers published the brochure *Geography of the Slovak Regions* (Tolmáči et al. 2007) and the *Geographical Dictionary* for the participants of Geographical Olympiad (Majerová 2006). Gercsák (online) pays attention exclusively to the use of Hungarian geographical names in foreign language literature. At our Institute of Geography, the graduate Eva Šostáková (2012) wrote her diploma thesis on the translation of geonames to English and the methodological application to geography teaching. Some of her results are presented later in the text.

Geonames can be attributed three basic functions: they reflect spatial characteristics, contribute to the shaping of space and contribute to identification of people with place. Geographical names (geonames) can be, in general, divided into:

- a. *generic* – river, forest, desert, cave. They are used not only by geographers but also by the wide public,
- b. *specific* – metropolis, agglomeration, life expectancy. They are used predominantly by geographers (or other scientists).

From the linguistic point of view, one can distinguish:

- a. *common names* – they name people, places, things or ideas that are not specific,
- b. *proper names* – they name the specific person, place, thing or idea and are capitalised in the text.

It is important to differentiate the geographical names, according to how they are used in a particular state:

- a. *exonym* – is a name for a place or a personal name that differs from that used in the official language within that place or for that person by the local inhabitants (in Slovakia it means the names of foreign places outside Slovakia – Paříž, Londýn, Moskva adopted to the Slovak language). Exonyms are therefore of interest to representatives of many disciplines.
- b. *endonym* – the names used by the people or local themselves (in Slovakia it means the names of places within Slovakia in the Slovak language – Slovenský raj, Spišský hrad, Slovenský kras).

An exonym is a toponym bestowed from the outside, and in the language from the outside. Exonyms are usually the products to render foreign toponyms in a manner and spelling suited to the characteristics of the receiver the language. Many exonyms are, to a greater or lesser degree, recognizable as forms of the original endonym. Their translation needs to be handled with sensitivity.

#### *Standardisation of geographical names in the world and in the Slovak Republic*

Geonames refer to the proper nouns of landscape objects and phenomena on the Earth and objects created by humans in the landscape. Geonames are apparent in tourism, cartography, international trade, transport, telecommunications, statistics, natural environment etc. (Miklušová 2010) and as Jordan (2009) says they are important parts of cultural heritage.

At the global level, the United Nations established the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) in 1959. It gave rise to the United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names (UNCSSGN) with the main need for global standardization of geographical names. UNGEGN promotes the recording of locally-used names reflecting the languages and traditions of a country. Its goal is for every country to decide on its own nationally standardized names through the creation of national names authorities. The UNCSSGN is held every five years, this year in New York (2012).

In the Slovak Republic, the geographical names are in charge of the Ministry of Interior and the Office of Geodesy, Cartography and Cadastre of the Slovak Republic in Bratislava. Last year, it arranges the seminar on the topical issues titled “Standardisation of Geographical Names”. The Terminology Authority, established in 1970, as the advisory body at the Office of Geodesy, Cartography and Cadastre of the Slovak Republic stipulates the standardised, official geographical name of individual toponyms which are obligatory for publishers of cartographical works, scientific publications, in mass media communications and in

**Table 1** English variants of selected geomorphological units of Slovakia.

<b>Malé Karpaty</b> <i>compiled by author and Fičor (2010)</i>	<b>Vysoké Tatry</b> <i>compiled by author</i>
Malé Karpaty (the Little Carpathians)	the Tatras
the Small Carpathians	the Vysoké and Nízke Tatry Mountains
Malé Karpaty Mountains	Vysoké Tatry Mts.
the Small Carpathian Mountains	the Tatra Mountains
the mountain range Malé Karpaty	the High Tatras
Small-Carpathian	High Tatra Mountains
the Little Carpathians	High Tatras Mountains
the Low Carpathian Mountains	High Tatras Range
the Little Carpathian mountains	
the Malé Karpaty - the Little Carpathians	
Malé Karpaty Mts. (Little Carpathians)	
the Malé Karpaty (Little Carpathians)	

administrative places. It works out the Conception of Standardisation of Geographical Names in the years 2006-2010.

As declared in 2010, one of the expected account of the Office to be published was “The Rules to use Slovak geographical names in foreign texts published in the Slovak Republic”, however, the publication has not been published yet.

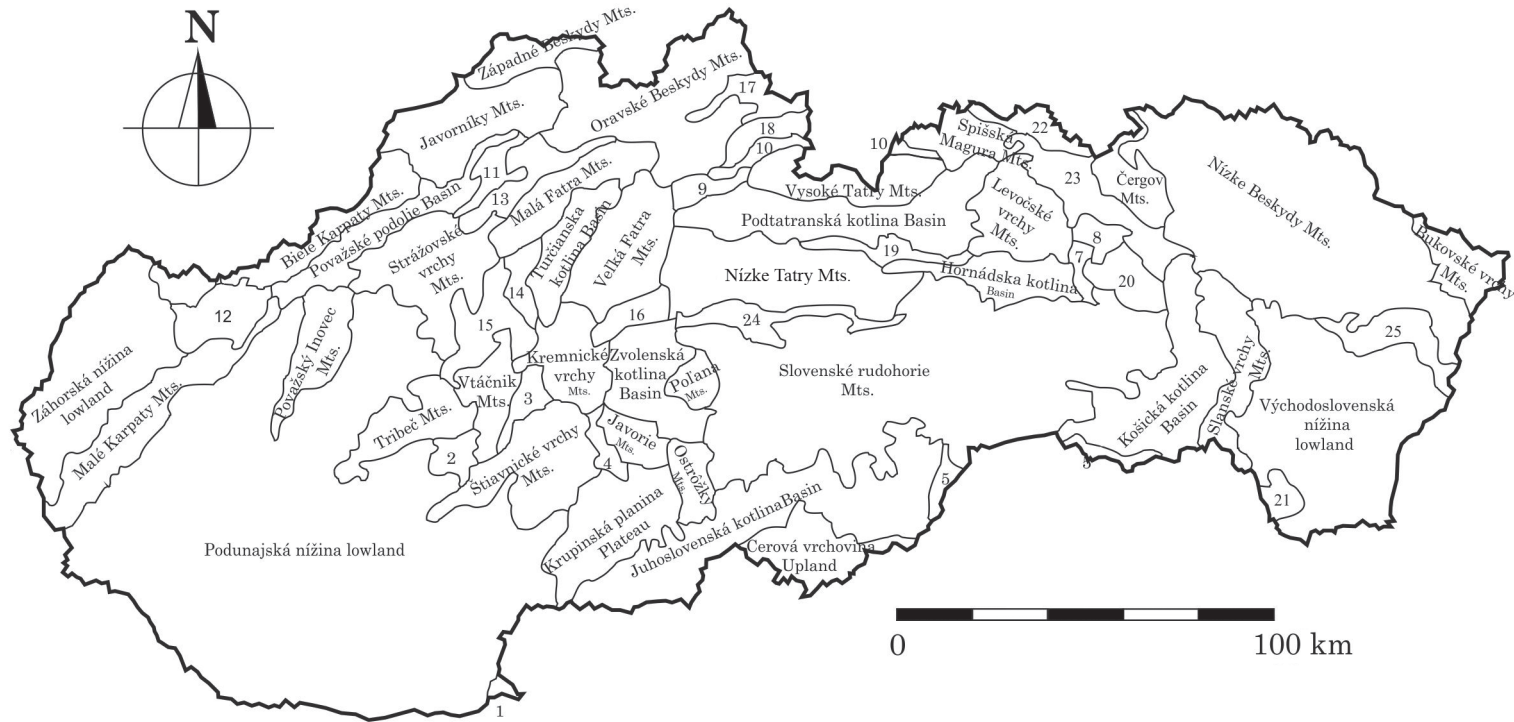
#### *Slovak geographical names in translation*

Firstly, we compiled many examples from academic, popular and tourist-related materials where translated Slovak geonames occurred. On the basis of what has been collected we pointed out the incorrect and insensitive translations of geomorphological units of Slovakia and some geonames on the administrative division of Slovakia to illustrate the problem. A good example to show the translation variations is “the geomorphological unit of the Malé Karpaty Mountains”. We have collected as many as twelve variations (Table 1). For the High Tatras as most commonly known tourist mountain regions the eight variations were found. The adjective “malé” was translated to small, little or low, the proper noun “Karpaty” has many variations and Vysoké Tatry varied as well. They may obviously cause ambiguous understandings to foreign readers

who hardly recognise what landscape region or hill they are reading about. This problem is even more complicated when the reader works with a map, a table or an accompanying text and there are more variations of one landscape feature.

Gercsák (online) writes on the recommendations how to proceed when translating from Hungarian to English. Some rules are likely to be adapted to Slovak as well:

1. Those few Slovak geographical names that have their widely accepted English equivalent are recommended for use without any restriction in running text and in professional publications The Danube, the High Tatras, the Low Tatras, the Slovak Karst. In this case, we recommend to use them respectively.
2. The generic term of the Slovak geographical names (always placed after the specific element) should be translated into English (f. ex. Východoslovenská nížina lowland, Slovenské Rudohorie Mountains).
3. All those Slovak geographical names (mostly ethnographic and landscape regions) that are compound names and conventionally written in one word should not be translated into English (e.g. Hornonitrianska kotlina – not Upper Nitra Basin, Spišská Nová Ves – not Spiš New Community).



- |                            |                               |                                  |                                     |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1 Burda Mts.               | 8 Bachureň Mts.               | 15 Hornonitrianska kotlina Basin | 22 Ľubovnianska vrchovina Upland    |
| 2 Pohronský Inovec Mts.    | 9 Chočské vrchy Mts.          | 16 Starohorské vrchy Mts.        | 23 Spišsko-šarišské medzihorie Mts. |
| 3 Žiarska kotlina Basin    | 10 Podtatranská brázda Furrow | 17 Oravská kotlina Basin         | 24 Horehronské podolie Basin        |
| 4 Pliešovská kotlina Basin | 11 Súľovské vrchy Mts.        | 18 Skorušinské vrchy Mts.        | 25 Vihorlatské vrchy Mts.           |
| 5 Bodvianska Hills         | 12 Myjavská pahorkatina Hills | 19 Kozie chrbty Mts.             |                                     |
| 6 Rožňavská kotlina Basin  | 13 Žilinská kotlina Basin     | 20 Šarišská vrchovina Upland     |                                     |
| 7 Branisko Mts.            | 14 Žiar Mts.                  | 21 Zemplínske vrchy Mts.         |                                     |

Base map: Geomorfologické pomery SR, 1 : 500 000, Atlas krajiny SR.

**Figure 1** Geomorphological units of Slovakia, proposal of standardised endonyms. Source: Šostáková (2012), modified by author.



Base map: Územné a správne usporiadanie SR, 1 : 500 000, Atlas krajiny SR.

Notes: The word 'region' may be substituted by 'self-governing region'. Bratislavský kraj region or Košický self-governing region is also an acceptable alternative.

**Figure 2** Administrative regions of Slovakia, proposal of standardised endonyms.

Source: Šostáková (2012), modified by author.

4. Slovak geographical names containing personal names (including the names of saints) should not be translated (on maps Svätý Anton, ul. Protifašistických bojovníkov Street, Gerlachovský štít peak, in the text the village of Svätý Anton, the Protifašistických bojovníkov Street, Gerlachovský štít peak).

Due to many variants found in the texts we constructed the map of geomorphological units in Slovakia (Figure 1) and suggested the standardised forms of geonames.

There are many variants how to translate the administrative levels of Slovakia. We suggest that the lowest level should be named community or municipality (*obec*). The difference between them origins in semantic notion (municipality is the lowest level of self-government in many west-European countries, usually larger than community), the middle tier should be named district (*okres*), e.g. the district of Košice-okolie, region (*kraj*), e.g. the example is the Košický kraj region or the Košický region (Figure 2). It is also mistake to ignore the diacritical mark which might unwillingly create a separate genuine toponym – Košice, not Kosice.

One more thing needs to be mentioned regarding the use the geonames in the text and on the maps. The grammar of English states some basic rules on using the articles with geographical names. There is usually little space on the maps (pictures, graphs etc.) so that no articles are added to geonames. Contrary to that, in the text (sentences) one has to use the articles according to basic rules stated below. Referring to geographical names or areas, we tend to use the definite article with: seas, mountain ranges, island groups, areas, rivers, deserts, hotels and pubs, cinemas and theatres. We generally use no articles with continents, counties and countries, towns and principal buildings, lakes, mountains and volcanoes.

## Conclusion

The use of the English language is required in many fields of business, media, sport and science as well. Even in the countries where English is not the country's primary language, a basic knowledge of English is generally required. That implies to the academic fields too. Geography as a scientific discipline much more than others uses geonames (place names) in the scientific papers. Using locally or regionally known Slovak geonames in English written paper by Slovak translator may cause misunderstanding in

addressing the geographical feature. We collected the list of geonames of Slovak endonyms translated to English and found many confusing translations.

We started to think about a certain kind of standardisation in translation process to preserve the ability of the foreign reader to address the geographical object on the map meaning what the common name besides the proper name means (kotlina – basin, tiesňava – gorge, rieka – river etc.). In the Slovak Republic no conventional list of geographical names has been released so far. According to Fičor (2010), it is high time to eliminate the foreign language variants which are negatively perceived in the popular or academic texts. Since much is being published in English in Geography field in these days, we decided to provide the proposal of translation of some most frequently used administrative and geomorphological geonames (Figures 1 and 2). We do not consider the proposed translation the final product and we are open to further discussions and refinements. The list of geonames is never ending.

*Note:* By the time the research review will have been released, the Rules for use of the names of geographical objects in foreign language text of publications published in the Slovak Republic were launched by the Office of Geodesy, Cartography and Cadastre of the Slovak Republic. We will focus on them in the forthcoming papers.

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