

A Brief Analysis of the Advantages and Disadvantages of Using Foreign Languages as Arabic Romanization for Arabic Geographical Names

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Abstract: After the Industrial Revolution, western powers conquered and colonized the Arab land from West Asia to North Africa for a long time, which had a profound impact on its culture which is directly or indirectly reflected in geographical names. This article attempts to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of using foreign languages as Arabic Romanization for geographical names from a historical and cultural perspective, and puts forward tentative suggestions for the production of geographical names and the construction of geographical name databases.

1. Existing problems in reality

Currently, according to the requirements of the United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names (UNCSGN), geographical names of all countries, including the Arab countries and regions should be expressed in a unified standard romanized alphabet in addition to their own languages. However, due to many reasons such as history and culture, there is no unified Arabic Romanization rule in most Arab countries and regions. From a worldwide perspective, There are three universally accepted rules of Arabic Romanization^[1], namely, Arabic Romanization of Egyptian style, Arabic Romanization of French style and Arabic Romanization of English style. Arabic Romanization of Egyptian style is mainly used in Egypt, Sudan and other North African regions, while Arabic Romanization of French style is mainly used in Algeria, Morocco, Djibouti and other former French colonial regions. Compared with them, Arabic Romanization of English style is the most widely used one considering that English is the most widely used language around the world. At present, most non Arabic speaking countries including China have adopted this rule when translating Arabic geographical names.

However unfortunately, the romanized spelling of Arabic geographical names shows a variety of ways in practical application which some of them are misused or mix used. For example, the geographical names like "ميدان التحرير" (Mayidan Al Tahriri) or "نهر النيل" (Nahr An Nil), are standard romanized Arabic; "شبه الجزيرة العربية" (Arabia Peninsula) or "جبل الحسين" (Hussain Hill), the specific term of the geographical names are standard romanized Arabic while the generic term of the geographical names are foreign language; "القلعة البيضاء" (White Qalat), "طريق شهيد محمد" (North Tarig Shahid Mohammad) or "شمال أفريقيا" (North Africa), the specific term of the geographical names are foreign language while the generic term of the geographical names are standard romanized Arabic.

The use of foreign language as Arabic Romanization for geographical names is contrary to the requirements of international standards, which leads to the chaotic phenomenon of "two names for one place" or even "multiple names for one place". For example, "مكة", the holy city of Islam is commonly referred to as "Makkah"^[2] in the Arab world while the Europeans only call it "Mecca"; For another example, "جدة" is represented by the romanized Arabic "Jiddah" in Saudi Arabia while the Europeans give it other names as "Jeddah", "Jedda" or "Juddah". The chaotic phenomenon has forced official news media and publications in non Arabic speaking countries to make a choice between adopting foreign language fully or partially and standard Arabic Romanization when translating Arabic geographical names.

2. Reasons for using foreign language as Arabic Romanization of geographical names

2.1 The sequelae of long-term colonial rule

In the 1760s, with the occurrence of the Industrial Revolution, the national strength of Western countries gradually increased. And for their own interests and ambitions, they invaded and colonized the Arab world, which was weak at that time. By the 1820s, all Arab countries except Saudi Arabia were completely colonized by Western powers, with the largest number of colonies controlled by Britain and France. During the long period of colonial rule, Western culture, especially its language, had a profound impact on the political culture, human geography and other aspects of Arab countries. One obvious evidence is that after Egypt was colonized by France, the ruling class and upper class of Egypt generally learned French and took mastering French as a condition for entering the government. After the Arab independence movement, Arab countries gained national independence and attempted to eliminate the impact of foreign languages on Arabic since the old colonial period through a series of language policies such as establishing Arabic as the official language of the country and government through legislation, which to some extent restored the orthodox status of Arabic, but the impact of foreign languages was not completely eliminated. For example, Algeria, Djibouti and other countries still use French as one of their official languages, and even in their higher education systems, French is used as a medium of teaching language. Djibouti's paper currency is mainly represented in French, with Arabic only used for annotations, and its coins are only represented in French^[3]. The Egyptian port "ءانيم قالوب" or "Prague Port" in English, its romanized geographical name should be "bulāq" according to the Romanization standard, but actually its romanized geographical name is directly represented by the French spelling "port de boulac"; For another example, "رئازجلا", according to the Arabic spelling of its country name, it should be romanized as "Al jazāir". However, influenced by the pronunciation habits of its colonial master, it uses two foreign language words, "Algeria" or "Algerie" to represent its current country name^[4].

2.2 The dominant position of foreign languages and lack of confidence in their own culture

Foreign language refers to languages such as English and French which are composed of the Roman alphabet. After the Industrial Revolution, with the continuous expansion of Western powers' colonies, these foreign languages were spread to various parts of the world, and the number of their users also increased. At the same time, due to the obvious advantages of the West powers in economy, technology, military and other aspects compared to third world countries, these comprehensive factors helped foreign languages become the universal language for international trade and communication. In order to better communicate with non Arabic speaking countries around the world, some Arab scholars believe that romanizing local names by using foreign language words especially English or French is easier for foreigners to understand and accept than standard Arabic Romanization, and in fact, these Arab scholars represent a part of the elite class of Arabs. Faced with the strong impact of Western culture, young people of some more open-minded Arab countries have adapted themselves to western lifestyles such as eating western food and celebrating Valentine's Day. During the Iraq War, even after American troops had begun attacking Baghdad, local youths continued to rent CDs of American movies for entertainment^[5]. This pathological admiration for western culture and lack of confidence in their own culture are also more or less reflected in the direct use of foreign language words as the Romanization of their geographical names. For example, the places like "مدينة الجندوبية" in Tunisia, "مدرسة العائلة المقدسة" and "جامعة القاهرة" in Egypt, "عريفجان" in Kuwait, their Romanization are presented by "Municipality de Jendouba", "collège de la sainte famille", "Cairo University", "Arifjan" instead of the standard Arabic Romanization, like "Madina Jundubah", "Madrast al 'ailat al muqadasat", "Jamiat al Qāhirat", "Urayfijān". With the development of the times, the national consciousness of Arab countries began to awaken. Some Arab countries have recognized the negative impact of using foreign language as their geographical name's Romanization since the old colonial era, and have actively abandoned such foreign language geographical names while formulating suitable romanized Arabic geographical names which are in line with their own culture and national conditions. For example, "الامارات العربية المتحدة", the United

Arab Emirates was initially called an English name "Trucial Oman", which means ceasefire and specially refers to an unfair peace treaty that British colonizers forced local chiefs to sign, with the condition that local chiefs were not allowed to interact with countries except Britain, thus facilitating his control over the emirate. Therefore, using this foreign language "Trucial Oman" as the name of the country carries a certain degree of humiliation. After gaining independence, the local chiefs abandoned the foreign language name and established a new romanized name, which is now known as "Al 'Imārāt al Mutahidat", referring to the United Arab Emirates^[6].

2.3 The immature geographical name management system and lack of surveying and mapping technology in Arab countries

After World War II, Arab countries gained their own independence from the old colonial rule and began to develop their own atlases, gazetteers and other products, but many Arab countries were unable to independently produce the related products due to their weak technology in surveying and mapping so that they had to commission Western companies to produce them. However, these western companies did not have a good understanding of the local culture and people in fact, they directly adopted the foreign language words of the old colonial era as the Arab geographical names for the purpose of saving capital investment and human resources. In addition, most Arab countries do not have mature top-down supporting mechanisms for the formulation, review, use, and management of geographical names. For example, the United Arab Emirates as one of the developed Gulf countries, it was not until 2021 when its national archives led the release of the book "Geographical and Historical geographical names Vocabulary of the United Arab Emirates". As for other undeveloped Arab countries, there is an approximate vacuum for their policies on geographical name management.

3. Analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of using foreign languages as Arabic Romanization for geographical names

3.1 Reduce national fiscal expenditure

Using foreign languages directly as Arabic Romanization for geographical names is actually adopting the old names of the colonial era which can reduce the financial burden of the country, mainly reflected in saving investment and expenses for collecting, researching, and formulating local geographical names. As we all know, the formulation and use of new geographical names is a national systematic project, involving the replacement of materials in various aspects such as education, publishing, culture and advertising, which will result in significant expenses. For example, in 2005, South Korea strongly requested China to change the Chinese translation of its capital name from "Han Cheng" to "Seoul" and The Chinese government adopted the proposal for the sake of friendly relations with South Korea^[7], and passed a law requiring domestic publishing houses and other institutions to change the materials that carry the previously used geographical name "Han Cheng" which caused billions of expense according to the unofficial estimates.

3.2 Hindering the formation of national confidence

The Romanization of a country's language is a part of its language, and even can be considered as an important part of its culture. Directly using foreign languages as Arabic Romanization for geographical names will increase the local people's dependence on foreign language words and mislead the next generation on the cultural tendencies. For example, many Arab young people only say "باص" (transliteration of English word "Bus") when they see a bus without saying "Hafilat" (Romanization of "حافلة"); When they see the post office, they only say "Post Office" without saying "Sunduq Al Barir" (Romanization of "صندوق البريد"). This will subtly influence the aesthetic taste of the local people. If this kind of social phenomenon continues for a long time without proper educational guidance from the government in terms of policies and laws, it will subtly influence the local people's aesthetic tastes and erode their own ethnic culture, leaving them in a state of cultural confusion, which is not conducive to forming national cultural confidence. ^[8,9]

3.3 Unable to realize the exact correspondence with the original meaning of Arabic geographical names

1) The phenomenon of multiple translations of one word exists in Arabic geographical names.

If foreign language words are used as the romanized Arabic spelling form for geographical names, the same Arabic word of geographical names can be translated into multiple foreign words with similar meanings. For example, "جبلالعرف" is translated as "Al Urf Hill"; "جبل السبت" is translated as "As Sabat Ridgehill"; "صباغ جبل" is translated as "Sabbagh Mound"; "جبل صحابة" is translated as "Sahabah Range", while "جبل حماطة" is translated as "Hamatah Ridge". As we can see from this example, the same Arabic word "جبل" is respectively translated as "Hill", "Ridgehill", "Mound", "Range", and "Ridge", but which of them is more appropriate to express "جبل"? I think most people who encounter such situations could not give an absolute answer. (See Table 1 for details)

Table 1 -List of Multiple Translations of Arabic Words

SN	Arabic word	Romanized Arabic word	Corresponding Foreign Language Word
1	جبل	Jabal	Hill,Mount,Mound,Range,idge
2	ميناء	Mina'	Port,Harbour
3	قلعة	Qal`at	Castle,Fort,Fortress, Blockhouse
4	خربة	Khirbat	Ruins,Remainder,Wasteland
5	ملعب	Mal`ab	Stadium,Gym,Playground
6	جزيرة	Jazirat	Ile,Island,Isle
7	خليج	Khalij	Gulf,Bay,Loch,Bight
8	مطار	Maṭar	Airport,Airfield,Airdrome
9	غابة	Ghabat	Forest,Silva,Bush
10	دار	Ḍar	Monastery,Hermitage,
11	ميدان	Mayidan	Square,Plaza

2) The phenomenon of polysemy exists in Arabic geographical names.

Table 2 -List of polysemy of Arabic words

SN	Arabic word	Romanized Arabic word	Corresponding Foreign Language Word
1	عين	Ain	Sping, Well,Pond,Eye
2	قناة	Ganāt	Canal,Ditch,Pipeline
3	برج	Burj	Castle,Tower,Lighthouse
4	وادي	Wadi, Wādī	Valley, Dry River, Depression, Watershed
5	تل	Tall	Hill,Ridge,Slope, Mountain mouth,Corner
6	أرض	Ard	Land,Farmland,
7	رأس	Ra`s	Cape,Mountain,Peak, Cliff,Rock,Reef
8	مقاطع	Maqāt`	Channel,Passage,Corridor,Strait
9	رصيف	Raṣīf	Dock,Pier
10	أرقوب	Argoub	Sand dunes,Mountain,Terraces
11	بركة	Birkah, Birkat	Bay,Lake,Pool,Reservoir
12	زاوية	Zawiyah,Zawiyat	Mosque,Holyland, Madrasah,Tomb
13	كروم	Kurūm	Mountain,Vineyard,Orchard

There is a phenomenon of polysemy in Arabic which means a word has multiple different meanings. For example,the Arabic word "رأس" whose Romanization is "Ra's" has many meanings:

- ① It has the meaning of "cape", such as the natural entity geographical name "Cape of Good Hope";
- ②It has the meaning of "corner", which refers to the protruding corner between two mountains and

the seaside; ③ It has the meaning of "mountain, peak", that is, "a single mountain or the peak of a mountain"; ④ It has the meaning of "steep cliff", that is, "steep mountain cliff"; ⑤ It has the meaning of "rocks, reefs", which means "rocks that are detached from land and rise above the water surface". Polysemous words such as "رأس" are often encountered in the process of geographical name production, and it is obviously unreasonable to express them simply and roughly by foreign language words with only one meaning. At the same time, the disadvantage of this method is that if the words of Arabic geographical names are read alone without combining other information, they cannot be translated into corresponding foreign words; On the contrary, it is impossible to restore or distinguish the original Arabic word based on a foreign word only. (See Table 2 for details)

3) The mismatch of translation exits between Arabic words and foreign language words

In Arabic, the meaning of some certain words does not correspond to the meaning of the present foreign language words. For example, the famous cultural heritage of Egypt "أب الهول", also known as "Sphinx", a borrowed foreign language word. In fact, the meaning of Arabic word "أب الهول" (whose romanized Arabic is "Abu al Hawl") is "father of terror" who has the body of lion and the head of Pharaoh Havre. He has a solemn expression, gazing into the distance with great majesty according to the form of the stone statue. However, the meaning of the foreign language word "Spinx" is a female demon in ancient Greek mythology who is suspicious and cruel with a lion body, a human face and two wings^[10]. From the perspective of tracing the etymology and meaning of "أب الهول" and "Sphinx", it is difficult for them to correspond with each other.

4. Conclusion and Suggestion

In response to the above problems, two viewpoints are proposed. Firstly, Arabic Romanization for geographical names still belong to the Arabic language and do not fall within the category of translation. We can use Romanization transcription rules to fully restore romanized Arabic geographical names to their original Arabic words; Secondly, using foreign languages as Arabic Romanization for geographical names belongs to the category of translation, and it can serve as annotations for the standard romanized Arabic geographical names, occupying a subordinate position of information. If we proceed from these two points of view, we can to some extent eliminate the frequent collisions and contradictions between the standard romanized Arabic geographical names and the use of foreign languages as Arabic Romanization for geographical names.

From this, we can see that using foreign languages as Arabic Romanization for geographical names can alleviate the financial burden of updating or formulating geographical names to a certain extent. However, due to many drawbacks such as multiple translation of one word, polysemy of one word, and lack of corresponding foreign language words, using foreign languages as Arabic Romanization is a non-standard behavior, which can cause confusion in understanding the Arabic Romanization and the practice of formulating geographical names, even further affect the formation of national cultural confidence. Overall, the disadvantages outweigh the advantages.

Therefore, language analysis should be conducted on the collected geographical name data from Arab countries and regions in the process of producing geographical names and building geographical name databases in the future. If there are cases where foreign language words are fully or partly used as Arabic Romanization for geographical names, they should be optimized and corrected, and their accuracy and proportion of quantity should be used as the criteria for judging the quality of geographical name data.

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