The naming of seas, maritime features and currents
(Examples in English, German and Hungarian)

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the naming of sea-related geographical names and identifies four major groups: 1) names of seas, 2) names of parts of seas, 3) names of sea currents, and 4) names of undersea features. The authors examine the structure of names, namely the specific and generic elements in these groups. The examples come from the English, German and Hungarian languages. The authors show that these names are often word-for-word translations in various languages. However, if the specific term is only a general geographical attribute or a cardinal point, it is less appropriate to identify the individual geographical object because the same name (word) may denote objects that are quite away in the geographical space.

Four groups of sea names

Although Hungary – just like Austria – is a landlocked country, Hungarian earth scientists and cartographers often face the problem of using proper geographical names related to seas in their daily work. This explains why both disciplines have to deal with the ways of usage of these names. The questions related to maritime names – or geographical names in general – can be studied from the direction of linguistics and earth science. This paper will use the linguistic approach.

When making a map, "the cartographer is using words and expressions that have to be unified in a special way; sometimes, the mapmaker also has to extend the linguistic means. Linguistics does not perform any of these two jobs..." (Földi, 1991).

The geographical names most often have two elements. These two parts of the name may have a different sequence in various languages. These elements are as follows:

- A geographical common noun or the *generic term* that expresses the character of the object: hill, valley, sea, river etc.
- The *specific term* that identifies the particular object within the group of similar objects; the linguistic analysis of the specific terms will produce interesting answers to the questions if this element of the geographical name can really identify the object.

The geographical names related to seas can be classified into four major groups[1]:

- *Names of seas*, which represent the regional division of the continuous water surface (these names were already mentioned in early documents)
- *Names of parts of seas*, which represent the subdivision of the continuous surface (most of these names were also mentioned in early documents)

[1] The *names of islands* may form a fifth group, but this paper discusses only those areas that are covered by or directly related to sea water.

- *Names of surface sea currents*, that is the names of the cold and warm "flows" forming a kind of system on areas that are not covered by permanent ice (these names have been known since the beginning of sea shipping)
- *Names of undersea features* (they were created for the identification of objects covered by sea water in the past 150 years).

Most of the names used today for the identification of "objects" in these four groups are *artificial* names. (The exceptions are names given by the natives.) The names belonging to the first two groups are the oldest names, and they reflect a strong respect for history and tradition. The names in the third group, which denote sea currents, continuously grew in number. As they reflect the development of science, these names were changed sometimes.

The names of the objects in the first three groups were not given according to a set of rules. The names of undersea features, however, were mostly given by scientists. The terminology of the generic terms (geographical common nouns) and the definition of objects have been standardized since the turn of the 19th and 20th century. The *American Board on Geographical Names* greatly contributed to the elaboration of a system of specific (individual) names after the 1960's. This process already started with the first publication of the "Monaco" world map series, *General Bathymetric Chart of the Oceans*, and it has been going on for more than a century.

The international congress of geographers in Berlin (1899) and the international conferences of oceanographers in Stockholm (1899) and Oslo (1901) expressed their wish to publish a general bathymetric map of the oceans and to standardize the terminology of undersea features. For this purpose, the Berlin congress set up a committee, which met in Wiesbaden in 1903. This committee studied and accepted the terminology of undersea features proposed by Alexander Supan. The congress of geographers approved of the proposal in Washington (1904).

The elaboration of rules and the recommendation for their wider use aim at developing a standardized usage of names related to seas. This process is similar to the objective of the United Nations to standardize the names of land objects.

Exonyms and endonyms

A geographical name is conventionally considered either an *endonym* or an *exonym*. On lands, almost all country and province names are exonyms. There are many exonyms also among the names of capitals, major rivers, lakes, mountains and large regions. If a geographical object has a great importance, it will be better known in its wider environment. Such objects have a great chance of having several names (exonyms) in the different languages.

The names denoting seas – with the exception of coastal waters –, sea currents and undersea features cannot be *strictly* considered exonyms, because international waters are not owned by any country and there is no official language over them. However, most of these names behave as exonyms. Namely, every people give names to identify these features according to their language rules. Naturally, these names are frequently word-for-word translations of the internationally known names.

In Hungary, the practice follows the policy that such a system of names and terms has to be developed that is in harmony with the international usage and internationally accepted principles, reflects the characteristics of the Hungarian language and, at the same time, satisfies the aims of the UN to standardize the geographical names. After studying the practice of several languages, it can be seen that other languages follow the same principle.

Types of names

As said above, most of the maritime names (seas, undersea features and sea currents) are *artificial names*. This is also true for the majority of island names and their variants, which were given during the great geographical discoveries.

A typical way of naming a feature – and not only in Hungarian – is giving the *word-for-word translation* of the name. Let us examine some examples in English, German and Hungarian according to the four groups of sea-related geographical names. All these names appeared in various publications and the authors did not translate anything. If the name of the feature was not available in a language, it is indicated by *???*. Such missing names can be mostly found among undersea features.

1. Names of seas

Indian Ocean	*Indischer Ozean*	*Indiai-óceán*
Baltic Sea	*Ostsee*	*Balti-tenger (Keleti-tenger)*
White Sea	*Weißes Meer*	*Fehér-tenger*
South China Sea	*Südchinesisches Meer*	*Dél-kínai-tenger*

2. Names of parts of seas[2]

Bay of Mexico	*Golf von Mexico*	*Mexikói-öböl*
Mozambique Channel	*Straße von Moçambique*	*Mozambiki-csatorna*
Hudson Strait	*Hudsonstraße*	*Hudson-szoros*
Drake Passage	*Drake-Straße*	*Drake-átjáró*

3. Names of sea currents

Gulf Stream	*Golfstrom*	*Golf-áramlás*
North Equatorial Current	*Nordäquatorial Strom*	*Északi-Egyenlítői-áramlás*
Equatorial Counter Current	*Äquatorial Strom*	*Egyenlítői-ellenáramlás*
Kuro Shio	*Kuroschio*	*Kuro-shio*

4. Names of undersea features

Atlantis Seamount	*Atlantis Kuppe*	*Atlantis-fenékhegy*
Newfoundland Basin	*Neufundlandbecken*	*Newfoundlandi-medence*
Reykjanes Ridge	*Reykjanesrücken*	*Reykjanesi-hátság*
Guinea Rise	*Guineaschwelle*	*Guineai-hát*

Hungarian generic terms (geographical common nouns) in sea-related names

The following section examines some of the typical Hungarian generic terms according to the four groups. The English and German variants will help understand the Hungarian way of naming.

1. Names of seas

[2] Only those maritime areas – bays, channels, straits and other sub-divisions of seas – are considered here that are listed in *Limits of Oceans and Seas*

*Indian **Ocean***	*Indischer **Ozean***	*Indiai-**óceán***
*Baltic **Sea***	*Ost**see***	*Balti-**tenger** (Keleti-**tenger**)*
*White **Sea***	*Weißes **Meer***	*Fehér-**tenger***
???	*???*	*Észt-**beltenger** (Kassaare laht)*
Setonaikai(?)	*Setonaikai(?)*	*Japán-**beltenger** (Setonaikai)*
???	*Amerikanisches **Mittelmeer***	*Amerikai-**középtenger***
*Canadian **Archipelago***	*Kanadische **Straßensee***	*Kanadai-**szigettenger***

2. Names of parts of seas

***Bay** of Mexico*	***Golf** von Mexico (**Bai**)*	*Mexikói-**öböl***
*Mozambique **Channel***	***Straße** von Moçambique (**Kanal**)*	*Mozambiki-**csatorna***
*Hudson **Strait***	*Hudson-**Straße***	*Hudson-**szoros***
*Drake **Passage***	*Drake-**Straße***	*Drake-**átjáró***

3. Names of sea currents

*Gulf **Stream***	*Golf**strom***	*Golf-**áramlás***
*North Equatorial **Current***	*Nordäquatorial **Strom***	*Északi-Egyenlítői-**áramlás***
*Equatorial **Counter Current***	*Äquatorial **Strom***	*Egyenlítői-**ellenáramlás***
*Kuro **Shio***	*Kuro**schio***	*Kuro-**shio***

4. Names of undersea features

*Philippine **Trench***	*Philippinen**graben***	*Filippínó-**árok***
*Blake **Escarpment***		*Blake-**fal***
*Northwest Atlantic **Mid-Ocean Canyon***	*???*	*Északnyugati-Atlanti-**fenékcsatorna***
*Atlantis **Seamount***	*Atlantis **Kuppe***	*Atlantis-**fenékhegy***
*New England **Seamounts***	*Neuengland**kuppen***	*Új-angliai-**fenékhegyek***
*Somali **Plain***	*???*	*Somali-**fenéksíkság***
*Guinea **Rise***	*Guinea**schwelle***	*Guineai-**hát***
*Reykjanes **Ridge***	*Reykjanes**rücken***	*Reykjanesi-**hátság***
*Amazon **Fan***	*???*	*Amazonas-**hordalékkúp***
*Ganges **Fan***	*???*	*Ganges-**hordaléklejtő***
*Hudson **Canyon***	*Hudson**rinne***	*Hudson-**kanyon***
*Newfoundland **Basin***	*Neufundland**becken***	*Newfoundlandi-**medence***
*Le Have **Bank***		*Le Have-**pad***
*Rockall **Plateau***	*Rockall**plateau***	*Rockall-**plató***
*Sunda **Shelf***	*Sunda**schelf***	*Szunda-**self***
*Le Have **Basin***	*???*	*Le Have-**selfmedence***
*Hudson **Shelf Valley***	***Unterseeisches** Hudson**tal***	*Hudson-**selfvölgy***
*Romanche **Gap***	*Romanche**tiefe***	*Romanche-**szakadék***
*Great Meteor **Tablemount***	*Große Meteor **Bank***	*Nagy-Meteor-**táblahegy***
East Novaya Zemlya		*Keleti-Novaja Zemlja-**teknő***

Trough		
*Norwegian **Trench***	*Norwegische **Rinne***	*Norvég-**teknővölgy***
*Mendocino **Fracture Zone***	*Mendocino-**Bruchzone***	*Mendocino-**törésöv***

Hungarian specific terms in sea-related names

The following section examines some of the typical Hungarian specific terms according to the four groups. The English and German variants will help understand the Hungarian way of giving specific terms.

1. Names of seas

???	**Amerikanisches** Mittelmeer	**Amerika**i-középtenger	*continent*
Indian Ocean	**Indischer** Ozean	**Indiai**-óceán	*subcontinent, country*
Canadian Archipelago	**Kanadische** Straßensee	**Kanadai**-szigettenger	*country*
Labrador Sea	**Labrador**see	**Labrador**-tenger	*region*
Baltic Sea	**Ost**see	**Balti**-tenger (**Keleti**-tenger)	*region, cardinal point (inexpressive)*
Greenland Sea	**Grönland**see	**Grönlandi**-tenger	*island*
Adriatic Sea	**Adriatisches** Meer	**Adriai**-tenger	*city*
Philippine Sea	**Philippinen**see	**Filippínó**-tenger	*people*
Beaufort Sea	**Beaufort**see	**Beaufort**-tenger	*person*
Coral Sea	Korallensee	**Korall**-tenger	*animal*
Sargasso Sea	**Sargasso**meer	**Sargasso**-tenger	*plant*
???	(Nördliches) **Eis**meer (Nordpolarmeer)	(Északi-)**Jeges**-tenger	*quality, state*
White Sea	**Weißes** Meer	**Fehér**-tenger	*colour*

2. Names of parts of seas

Great **Australian** Bight	Große **Australische** Bucht	Nagy-**Ausztráliai**-öböl	*continent*
Gulf of **Mexico**	Golf von **Mexico**	**Mexikó**i-öböl	*country*
Bay of **Biscay**	Golf von **Biskaya**	**Vizcayai**-öböl	*province, region*
Taiwan Strait	**Formosa**straße	**Tajvani-szoros**	*island*
Gulf of **Aden**	Golf von **Aden**	**Aden**i-öböl	*city*
Persian Gulf	**Persischer** Golf	**Perzsa**-öböl	*people*
Hudson Strait	**Hudson**straße	**Hudson**-szoros	*person*

It is worth mentioning the history of the Hungarian name for the Persian Gulf, which is a typical example of changing a name under political pressure. (Sources are the world atlases published by Cartographia, because they relatively quickly update the changes according to the "official" Hungarian usage.)

–1959: Perzsa-öböl [Világatlasz, 1959]

1961–2001: Perzsa (Arab)-öböl [Politikai és gazdasági világatlasz, 1961; Világatlasz, 2001]
2004–: Perzsa-öböl [Földrajzi világatlasz, 2004]

3. Names of sea currents

East **Australian** Current	Ost**austral**-Strom	Kelet-**ausztrália**i-áramlás	*continent*
Brazil Current	**Brasil**strom	**Brazília**i-áramlás	*country*
East **Greenland** Current	Ost**grönland**strom	Kelet-**grönland**i-áramlás	*island*
Labrador Current	**Labrador**strom	**Labrador**-áramlás	*region*
Gulf Stream	**Golf**strom	**Golf**-áramlás	*(part of sea: Gulf of Mexico)*
North **Equatorial** Current	Nord**äquatorial** Strom	Északi-**Egyenlítői**-áramlás	*location*
Antarctic Circumpolar Current	**Westwind**drift	**Nyugati szél** áramlás	*cause or location*
Peru Current	**Humbold**strom	Perui **(Humboldt)**-áramlás	*person*

4. Names of undersea features

4.1 Specific term *roughly describing the location* of the feature

a) Reference to the specific term of a *nearby* (well-known) feature

Aleutian Ridge, Aleutian Trench, Aleutian Basin	**Aleuten**rücken, Aleutengraben, Aleutenbecken	**Aleut**-hátság, Aleut-árok, Aleut-medence	*Aleutian Islands*
Madagascar Plateau, Madagascar Basin	**Madagaskar**rücken, Madagaskarbecken	**Madagaszkár**i-plató, Madagaszkári-medence	*near to Madagascar*

b) Reference to the *direction* of a well-known feature

South Honshu Ridge	**Süd-Honschu**rücken	**Déli-Honshui**-hátság	*located south of Honshu*
West Mariana Basin	**Westliches Marianen**becken	**Nyugati-Mariana**-medence	*located west of the Mariana Islands*

c) Expressing the *extension* by another feature

Azores-Gibraltar Ridge	Azorenschwelle	**Azori–Gibraltári**-hátság
Peru-Chile Trench	Perugraben + Atacamagraben	**Peru–Chilei**-árok

d) Canyons are normally named after a *land object* (such as a river, cape, settlement) because they usually run near to the continent

Hudson Canyon	Hudsonrinne	**Hudson**-kanyon	*river*
Barrow Canyon	???	**Barrow**-kanyon	*Point Barrow*
Lisboa Canyon	???	**Lisszaboni**-kanyon	*city*

4.2 The specific terms may be *reminder names* in honour of ships, persons, expeditions, organisations and institutions that played an important role in marine science

a) The object is named after the *ship* that explored or confirmed the existence of the feature

Atlantis Seamount	**Atlantis** Kuppe	**Atlantis**-fenékhegy
Great **Meteor** Tablemount	Große **Meteor** Bank	Nagy-**Meteor**-táblahegy

b) *Personal names* may be the name after the person who

– discovered or described the feature;
– played an important role in the interpretation of measured data that resulted in identifying the feature;
– greatly contributed to marine science;
– had an outstanding role in the history of a nation.

Heezen Plateau	???	**Heezen**-plató
Ewing Seamount	???	**Ewing**-fenékhegy

c) *Name of an expedition*

Northern Holiday Seamount	???	**Northern Holiday**-fenékhegy	*No translation*
Northwind Ridge	???	**Northwind**-hátság	*No translation*

d) *Name of an organisation or institution* in marine research

An Rise	???	**AN**-hát	*Akademii Nauk SSSR*
Arlis Gap	???	**ARLIS**-szakadék	*Arctic Research Laboratory Island*
Sio Guyot	???	**SIO**-táblahegy	*Scripps Institution of Oceanography*

4.3 The *name of groups of features* may be the name of various historical persons, mythological figures, constellations

a)

Mathematicians Seamounts	???	**Matematikus**-fenékhegyek

Archimedes Seamount	???	Archimédesz-fenékhegy
Euclid Seamount	???	Euklídesz-fenékhegy
Gauss Seamount	???	Gauss-fenékhegy

b)

Musicians Seamounts	???	**Muzsikus**-fenékhegyek
Brahms Seamount	???	Brahms-fenékhegy
Donizetti Seamount	???	Donizetti-fenékhegy
Schubert Seamount	???	Schubert-fenékhegy

4.4 *Descriptive name* of the landform

Hook Ridge	???	Hook-hátság
Horseshoe Seamounts	???	Horseshoe-fenékhegyek

Inexpressive names

Geographical names often form clusters. A specific term may be the part of several names in the same geographical environment.

Hudson River – Hudson Shelf Valley – Hudson Canyon	**Hudson** River (!) – Unterseeisches Hudsontal – Hudsonrinne	**Hudson** (river) – Hudson-selfvölgy – Hudson-kanyon

or

Tonga – Tonga Ridge – Tonga Trench	**Tonga** – Tongarücken – Tongagraben	**Tonga** (country) – Tonga-hátság – Tonga-árok

These name clusters may help orientation, because if only one element of the cluster is known the others can be easily remembered.

However, there are names that do not express anything about the location of a geographical feature in the world map, because their specific term is so much general. Those names whose specific term is a *general geographical attribute* or a *cardinal point* and stands alone belong to this category of *inexpressive names*. There are several such names related to the seas and marine features.

a) *General geographical attributes*

Great	Groß	Nagy-
Little	Klein	Kis-
Inner	Inner	Belső-
Outer	Außer	Külső-, Elő-
	Hinter	Hátsó-
Central	Zentral	Központi-
Mid	Mittel	Közép-
Middle	Mittel	Középső-
	Unter	Alsó-

	Ober	Felső-
Old	Alt	Régi-
New	Neu	Új-

b) *Cardinal points*

North, Northern	Nord, Nördlich	Észak-, Északi-
Northeast, Northeastern	Nordost, Nordöstlich	Északkelet-, Északkeleti-
Northwest, Northwestern	Nordwest, Nordwestlich	Északnyugat-, Északnyugati-
East, Eastern	Ost, Östlich	Kelet-, Keleti-
West, Western	West, Westlich	Nyugat-, Nyugati-
South, Southern	Süd, Südlich	Dél-, Déli-
Southeast, Southeastern	Südost, Südöstlich	Délkelet-, Délkeleti-
Southwest, Southwestern	Südwest, Südwestlich	Délnyugat-, Délnyugati-

Let us see some examples of those names that contain this type of specific terms

1. Hungarian *sea names*

Pacific Ocean	Stiller Ozean (**Grosser** Ocean)	Csendes-óceán (**Nagy**-óceán)
North Sea	**Nord**see	**Északi**-tenger
Baltic Sea	**Ost**see	Balti-tenger (**Keleti**-tenger)

However, *Európai-Északi-tenger (Europäisches Nordmeer)* is not an inexpressive name. As for the Baltic Sea, it is recommended to use it in Hungarian *(Balti-tenger)* instead of the translation from German (meaning *East Sea*), because it unambiguously helps identification.

2. Hungarian *names of parts of seas*

Studying the names of lager parts of seas shows that there are in fact no inexpressive names in this group. The specific terms of bays, straits and channels are individual names. However, inexpressive names frequently appear when we come to the less important and less known parts of the world ocean. Here are some examples.

Laguna **Superior**	Laguna **Superior**	**Felső**-lagúna (Mexico, Gulf of Tehuantepec)
North Channel	**Nord**kanal	**Északi**-csatorna (between Scotland and Northern Ireland)
Canal do **Norte**	Canal do **Norte**	**Északi**-csatorna (Amazon estuary)

3. Hungarian names of *sea currents*

Although inexpressive names are not typical of currents either, there are some examples. Naturally, these names refer to the various branches of the large ocean currents.

Nord Cape Current	Norwegischer Strom	**Északi**-foki-áramlás

As we do not know the names of all local and smaller currents along the seashores of the world ocean, there may be many more inexpressive names.

4. Hungarian names of *undersea features*

Although the names of undersea features were mostly given on a scientific basis and according to regulations, many inexpressive names were born in the past less than three decades. The name giving follows the principle of using the names of well-known features and geographical objects to help the identification and location of these undersea features. If we "borrow" an inexpressive name to create a new one, the new name will not help to achieve this goal. Here are some examples.

Northeast Cape Shoal	???	**Északkeleti-foki-**homokzátony
East Cape Ridge	???	**Keleti-foki**-hátság
East Cape Trough	???	**Keleti-foki**-hasadék

In these cases, *East Cape* or *Northeast Cape* are inexpressive names; consequently, the new names formed from them will be inexpressive too.

Let us see some examples of some basic inexpressive specific terms of undersea features. (The examples come from *Gazetteer of Undersea Features, third edition, 1981.* Unfortunately, we could not find a source publication in German that would include such a detailed glossary of names.)

North Bank	???	**Északi-**pad
North Reef	???	**Északi**-sziklazátony
North Seachannel	???	**Északi**-fenékcsatorna
East Reef	???	**Keleti**-sziklazátony
Eastern Shoals	???	**Keleti**-homokzátonyok
Eastward Knoll	???	**Keleti-**bérc
Western Reef	???	**Nyugati**-sziklazátony
Western Shoals	???	**Nyugati-**homokzátonyok
West Reef	???	**Nyugati-**sziklazátony
Southern Reefs	???	**Déli-**sziklazátonyok
South Reef	???	**Déli-**sziklazátony
South Seachannel	???	**Déli-**fenékcsatorna

These names contain only the four cardinal points. If we look at the supplementary directions, there are a lot more… However, the following types of names do not belong to this category, because the names *Mexico* and *Novaya Zemlya* help locating the feature:

East Mexico Shelf	???	**Kelet**-mexikói-self
East Novaya Zemlya Trough	???	**Keleti Novaja Zemlja-**teknő

Conclusions

In the four major groups of names – seas, parts of seas, sea currents and undersea features –, many word-for-word translations can be found in various languages. If the specific name is a general geographical attribute or a cardinal point, the name will be inexpressive and will not really help the identification of the object, and often the same name (line of characters) refers to features that may be found in a completely different geographical space.

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