NP 3602 Remarks on revision (Japanese romanization)

COMMENTARIES / DECISIONS

Companion document to N 2346 (NP 3602 Revision Japanese Romanization)

FOLLOW UP

2012-05-04
Some remarks on our proposal to revise ISO 3602

Our wish to plead for a revised ISO 3602 standard stems from two origins.

First, as already stated in the proposal form, we consider it imperative to make the modified Hepburn system (instead of the little-used kunreishiki system stipulated by the current ISO 3602) the mandatory standard for the Romanization of Japanese, which it has virtually been for many decades worldwide.

Secondly, our proposal is the outcome of several year’s work that has already been put into preparing a draft for a German national standard (DIN) for the Romanization of Japanese (kana script) by a group of experts that includes German and Austrian members. This draft has recently been finalized and is about to be made public by the German Institute for Standardization (DIN) on its discussion portal, where it may be reviewed by other experts and its prospective users. It is due to become an official standard – possibly in revised form – in 2012.

As a basis for discussion, we shall submit an English version of the document within the next 90 days, hoping that much time and energy of a possible working group might be saved by having a detailed and finished draft to deliberate upon. As to its content, I would like to draw attention to a few selected points.

In addition to stipulating modified Hepburn as the standard system for Romanizing Japanese, the new draft carries major new regulations not included in the current ISO 3602 yet crucial, as we believe, for an effectively standardized Romanization. Most importantly, these new fields include:

- the Romanization of nonstandard kana combinations used to write foreign names and loanwords as well as for other phonetic purposes
- word segmentation

Kana writing practices for foreign words and names and for other phonetic expressions constitute an ever-expanding segment of contemporary written Japanese. Unaddressed by the current ISO 3602, this problem has been tackled to a certain degree by the now officially defunct (US) ANSI Z39.11-1972, which contains a limited list of nonstandard kana combinations. In the present draft, this list has been much expanded, but it is also made clear that (a) in many cases, correct Romanization depends on textual context and the language of origin of the respective word or name, and that (b) a comprehensive regulation of this field is impossible due to the number of new combinations generated continuously.

Secondly, the document includes a detailed chapter on word segmentation and agglutination, common standards for which we consider vital for any effective data exchange and retrieval. Neither ISO 3602 nor the former ANSI standard deal with this question, while it is covered quite extensively by the ALA-LC Romanization Tables Japanese. Given the fact that for libraries worldwide, Japanese title records, especially from the Japanese NACSIS database, are believed to constitute the bulk of data downloaded from external sources, we have thought it necessary to orientate our own draft rather on Japanese (primarily NACSIS) practices of
(kana) word segmentation than on the US rules. Yet Romanization standards are not meant to be limited to librarianship, but are intended for general use, and in this respect some NACSIS regulations (such as the agglutination of particles or certain rules for writing proper names) can only be deemed unacceptable for a wider usership within the academic field, the media etc. These rules, we believe, should be formulated somewhat differently, which also applies to a small number of other points the regulation of which has been attempted with a view to a more practical and linguistically logical use.