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The propriality of ethnonyms and the problem of their capitalisation

Abstract

This article aims to discuss the problem of ethnonyms' propriality and to represent different views concerning ethnonyms' status and their belonging or non-belonging to the field of onomastics. Three opinions on ethnonyms are considered: ethnonyms as common names, ethnonyms as proper names and ethnonyms as a phenomenon bordering proper and common names. The analysis is based on different scientists' arguments concerning this kind of onyms and their place in onomastics. The data analysis enables to conclude that ethnonyms in plural denoting entire peoples are better classified as proper names. However, when determining ethnical belonging of an individual, one can refer to an ethnonym as a common name, although in some contexts an ethnonym even in singular might bear a proper name meaning. The issue of ethnonyms' propriality is considered from the point of Russian language established tradition to write them in lowercase letters. It is concluded that it is inconsistent to classify ethnonyms as appellatives based only on their non-capitalisation. Additional possibilities to express different meanings are indicated for languages exploiting ethnonyms' capitalisation. Meanwhile the author underlines the importance of the established tradition to begin ethnonyms with a lowercase letter in Russian. The selected examples show that when a language differing the ethnonym from the non-ethnonym only by means of word capitalisation can use this orthographical technique in practice, Russian may resort to the word formation or substitution to distinguish clearly an ethnonym from any other noun.

Keywords: ethnonym, proper name, common name, singular and plural, uppercase and lowercase letters

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