Folk Etymology in the Streets of St. Louis

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Krapp (1925, 208), following Kuhns (1901, 242), states that non-English names imported into the United States are typically Americanized in one of three ways: through translation (e.g. *Zimmerman* > *Carpenter, Fuchs* > *Fox,* and *Lenbengut* > *Livingood*), transliteration (e.g. *Reis* > *Rice, Kuhn* > *Coon,* and *Mueller* > *Miller*), or analogical imitation (e.g. *Roesch* > *Rush, Reichart* > *Richards,* and *Roth* > *Rhoades*). Once this passage from foreign to American occurs, elaborate folk etymologies are often constructed that help "explain" the origins of the new versions of the names: *Gnaw Bone,* Indiana, for example, which is probably a corruption of the French *Narbonne,* is frequently linked to stories of people gnawing on bones (Baker and Carmony 1975, 61).

Although such Americanizing and etymologizing have undoubtedly occurred throughout the United States, it seems logical that those areas in which large numbers of various ethnic groups have settled would be especially rich in fossilized remnants of these phenomena. The city of St. Louis, Missouri, is one such area, for during the nineteenth century especially it became the new home for thousands of displaced Germans, Irish, French, Czechs, Poles, Italians, Scotch, and Spanish. This essay takes as its corpus of data the street names of the Gateway City, and shows not only the kinds of Americanizing and etymologizing that have occurred, but the relatively simple and predictable phonological processes that underlie these Americanized names - including reasons why those processes should have occurred especially in St. Louis - as well.

To begin, I should perhaps note that most of this discussion will center on Kuhns's and Krapp's rubric of analogical imitation, not only because most of the data from St. Louis seem to fit especially well into this category, but because many of the names exemplifying apparent translations or transliterations may do so only coincidentally. In *Bellefontaine* > *Bell Fountain* and *Bellevue* > *Bell View,* for example, we see obvious analogical imitation in *Belle* > *Bell* and apparent translation in *-fontaine* > *Fountain* and *-vue* > *-view;* yet the phonological similarity in these

"translations" is so strong that we cannot rule out the possibility of ana-
logical imitation here as well. *Marguerite* > *Margaret* and *Lakemont*
>*Lake Mount* present similar problems in analysis, and with *Le Sabre* >
Le Saber it is difficult to know whether translation, analogical imitation,
or even transliteration is responsible for the spelled metathesis of "e" and
"r".

A second prefatory comment concerns the impetus for and methodology
of the present study. My interest in (indeed, even acute awareness of) the
Americanization and etymologization of street names in St. Louis began
as a by-product of a much larger project involving the language variation
inherent in the Gateway City (see Murray pending): interviewing hun-
dreds of residents and listening to them pronounce the "foreign" names of
the streets in their areas convinced me that a wealth of untapped data
concerning folk etymology and sound change existed for anyone willing to
collect it. Yet to focus these people's attention on their pronunciation of
the names in question could easily lead to self-consciousness resulting in
an unnatural, skewed production of sounds.

Overcoming this problem proved quite simple, however: following the
example set by William Labov in his now-famous department store sur-
vey (Labov 1972, 49-50), I merely asked as many people as possible in a
given area how to reach a destination that I had already determined
would force them to include a specific street or streets in their answer.
After receiving the directions, I thanked my unknowing informants for
their time, noted down the pronunciation of the name(s) in question, and
went on to the next potential respondent. As could perhaps be expected,
the residents of a particular area typically provided extremely homogene-
ous responses; if a variant response was given, it was almost always from
someone who I later learned was new to the neighborhood. And although
I did not keep strict demographic records on all of my informants, I can
say with certainty that only the quality (i.e. phonetic articulation) of the
pronunciation of the names was influenced by such factors as age, social
class, and gender of the speaker; the perception of names (e.g. *Fontaine* as
Fountain) remained consistent for all the respondents of a given area.

Consider now the following list of street names, which is a representative
sample of the kinds of Americanization that have occurred in the Gate-
way City. (To avoid reporting nonce usages, only those pronunciations
given by informants from at least ten different households are included.)

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Spelling (as on maps and signs)	Pronunciation
Allemania	[ˈæli#ˈmɛyniə]
Angleterre	[ˈæŋgəl#ˈtɛyr], [ˈɛynǰ əl#ˈtir]
Bach	[ˈbæk]
Bellefontaine	[ˌbɛl#ˈfawntən]
Bellevue	[ˈbɛl#ˌvyu]
Bienville	[ˈbin ˌvɪl]
Blanche	[ˈblænč], [ˈblæŋki]
Bon Hills	[ˈbon#ˈhɪlz], [ˈboni#ˈhɪlz]
Bonjour	[ˈbon#ǰɔy]
Braeshire	[ˈbrɛyʒər]
Chalet	[ˈčælət]
Charbonier	[ˌsɔrbəˈiər]
Chopin	[ˈčapən]
Chouteau	[ˈšoro]
Coeur De Ville	[ˈkɔrdərɔy ˌvɪl]
Creve Coeur	[ˈkriv#ˈkoər]
D'Amato	[təˈmɛytə]
De Baliviere	[dəˈbaləvər]
El Tigre Ter	[ˌtaygər#ˈtir]
Falaise	[ˈfɔlsiz]
Feliz	[ˈfilɪks]
Ferrier	[ˈfɛyri#ˈɛyr]
Garnier	[ˈgɔrnər]
Hermosa	[harˈmozə]
Hirondelle	[ˈhir#ən#ˈtɛl]
Kassebaum	[ˈkɛys#ˌbam]
La Feil	[ˈlæf#ˌɔyl]
Las Hembra	[ˈlɔst#ˌɛmbər]
La Verne	[laˈvarn]
Le Coeur	[ˈlɪkər]
Le Sabre	[la#ˈsɛybər]
Marguerite	[ˈmɔrgrət]
Montauk	[ˈmæn#ˈtɔk]
Montclair	[ˈmawnt#ˈklɛyr]
Montmartyr	[ˈmawnt#ˈmɔrtər]
Moule	[ˈmoldi]
Pontchartrain	[ˈpančaˌtrɛyn]

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Reauville	['rovər͵vɪl]
Rio Silva	['rɪl#'sɪlvər]
Rissant	['rɪsənt]
Rivoli	[͵ræviˈoli]
Rouvre	['rovər]
San Bonita	[͵sænbəˈnirə]
Stuyvesant	[stuˈvɛsənt]
Toreador	['toərə͵doər]
Yves	['hayvz], ['ivz]

Admittedly, some of these corruptions seem nothing more than fanciful creations; it is difficult to imagine any neighborhood of people seeing spellings such as *Bonjour, Coeur De Ville, D'Amato, Falaise, Hirondelle, Moule, Rivoli,* and *Yves,* yet producing pronunciations such as (transcribed into conventional orthography) *Bone Joy, Corduroyville, Tomato, Falsies, Hear and Tell, Moldy, Ravioli,* and *Hives.* Had I not been posing as a lost driver in need of serious guidance, and had not the quantity of people producing each of these Americanized names been so large, I would certainly have suspected that the linguistic wool was being pulled over my eyes. (Even now the possibility of collusion does not escape me, but I attribute such suspicions to paranoia rather than observable evidence.) A further bit of proof for the genuineness of these names lies in the folk etymologies that have been created to help explain the origins of some of them. Following is one informant's account of the history of *Falaise* (pronounced *Falsies*) - a history substantiated in all but the most minor details by two other people I later interviewed:

[Do you know how that street got its name?]

Well, I'll tell you. See, along about - oh, maybe sixty or seventy years ago, there was these two gals, see. They were sisters. One's named Lola or Lolita, something like that, and the other was called Dora. Lived right down the block there. I can't remember their last name. Anyway, it don't matter. But see, one of 'em was real big up here [indicates chest], and the other one was just sort of - well, normal, or average, you know. Nothing too special. [Laughs.] Anyhow, them two always was at one another's throats, just fighting and bickering, and once in a while, I mean, they had a real fight. You know? I mean they'd hit one another, and be rolling on the ground, and all. It musta been quite a sight. Well, one day they were walking home from the school, I guess, and got into one of these real bad arguments, and 'fore you know it they were on the ground trying to kill one another. That's when it happened. The one ripped at the dress of the other, tore part of it right off, and you know what? The gal with the big -

> [indicates chest again] - well, all this padding come out of her dress, and it turns out she wasn't really any bigger than her sister. Huh! What a deal, huh? I guess people always wondered about why they were so much alike in other ways and just not - you know, the same there, too. Well, there's the answer. The one just wore padding. 'Course after that - there was quite a few people seen that happen, did I say that? I guess a crowd had gathered. Anyhow, after that happened, people started calling this the street where the falsies fight took place. The falsies fight street. And pretty soon, the "falsies" part just sort of took hold, I guess. But that's how it got its name, from them two gals and their fight.

In response to the same question, here is one account - again, substantiated by others' stories - of the history behind La Feil (*Laugh Oil*):

> Oh, shoot, everybody knows that. It's because of the family used to live in the neighborhood somewhere, the one where so many of 'em were mentally retarded. This has been quite some time ago, I think. I'm not real sure. But these people, the mother and father, and one or two of the kids, too, were retarded mentally. They weren't crazy or anything, understand, just a little slow - and always real cheerful and happy, big smiles on their faces, like nothing in the world bothered 'em. Maybe it didn't, I don't know, since they were a little out of touch with reality. But they always were smiling, and a kind of a joke grew up around their good dispositions. People - some people started saying that this family had the secret to happiness, like sort of a potion or something like that. They called it laugh oil: you take your daily dose and spend the rest of the day in good spirits. They were the laugh oil family, and pretty soon this was the laugh oil neighborhood and this street here was the laugh oil street. So, see? That's how it happened.

Finally, consider this tale concerning the origins of Ferrier (*Fairy Air*):

> Listen, I know what you're thinking, but that's not how it happened. We've never had any of them kinda people in this neighborhood. Not that I know of, anyway. Don't you know the story of forest fairies? How when the fairies come out in the forest, the flowers start to bloom and the grass greens up and everything gets real still and the air gets real clean? It's just a fairy tale - I mean [laughs] - but that's really where the name comes from. It used to be this neighborhood was - you could get up in the morning and step outside and get this real clean country smell in the air, just like the fairies had been out all night. Not so much any more, of course, what with all the cars and such, but it used to be. Really. Fairy air, it was like. That's where it comes from - the name.

These etymological stories seem as fanciful and creative as the names they putatively explain; yet the sincerity and, again, the frequency with which they are told suggests that the informants genuinely believe them.

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When posed with the question of how the folk etymologies and Americanized names can be explained in the face of the "foreign" spellings that still exist on the street signs, the informants often suggested that the true name was perhaps a corruption of the fanciful one - just the opposite sequence of events from what actually occurred. (It is not possible that the fanciful name is in reality also the true name, with the spelling later changed for any number of reasons - in the case of *Falsies*, for example, to escape what could be perceived as pejorative connotations of the word; original street maps in the Hall of Records confirm that the present orthographies of the street names were also the original ones.)

And now the questions arise as to precisely why and how these name changes occurred. What phonological processes common to situations in which languages come into contact permit or even encourage such sound changes? Most generally, of course, "whenever the patterns of the [foreign language] are new to the [speakers of the native language] ... some kind of adjustment of [speaking] habits occurs." This is a "normally unconscious procedure" typically manifested in "a native sound sequence [being] used to imitate a foreign one" (Haugen 1950, 213, 215). Or, as Bolinger (1975, 406) has written, "the hearer encounters an unfamiliar term, assumes it ought to be familiar, and proceeds to associate it with something he already knows." Even more simply, we can say that linguistic contact breeds interference, the end result of which is change.

Weinreich (1953, 18-19) notes that phonological interference can occur in one of only four ways: sounds can be (1) under-differentiated (i.e. when two sounds of a foreign language that are not differentiated in the native language are confused by speakers of the native language); (2) over-differentiated (i.e. when speakers of the native language impose distinctions of sound on the foreign language where they are not required); (3) re-interpreted (i.e. when sounds of the foreign language are reconceived by speakers of the native language according to features that are relevant in the native language); or (4) substituted (i.e. when sounds are defined identically in both the native and foreign language, but are still pronounced differently in the two languages).

Each of these phenomena is prominent in the St. Louis area. When German *Bach* [bɑχ] is Americanized to [bæk], for example, we see under-differentiation as the voiceless velar fricative [χ] changes manner of articulation and becomes the stop [k], and substitution as [æ] is spoken in place of [ɑ]. *Bon* [bõ] > [bɑn] in *Bonjour* [bõʒuʀ] > [bɑn#jɔɪ] and *Bon Hills* [bõ#hɪlz] > [bɑn#hɪlz] illustrates reinterpretation in that the

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nasalization of [ɔ] in both cases is reinforced during the process of Amer-
icanization by the following [n], which is a redundant feature in French.
And over-differentiation can be found in any of the initial, unaspirated
French voiceless stops that acquire aspiration as they are Americanized -
the "p" of French *Pontchartrain* ([p]) versus the "p" of American
Pontchartrain ([pʰ]), for example.

Weinreich's four rubrics of phonological interference can thus be used to
account linguistically for all of the sound changes that have occurred in
the Americanization of St. Louis street names. (Not to be ignored as
well are the changes in stress that have occurred: regardless of the
foreign language involved, English stress rules supplant the non-English
ones in every case.) The question posed earlier concerning why these
changes have occurred thus appears to be solved; yet there are other less
purely linguistic aspects of the question that remain to be explored. In
short, we would like to know what other factors may have influenced
either the changes themselves or the frequency with which they occurred.
Put another way, why should any of Weinreich's four rubrics apply to
the St. Louis street names at all? Although languages coming into con-
tact with one another is a necessary prerequisite for interference and
change, it is not a sufficient prerequisite: given that changes are possible
but not inevitable, then why have they occurred here?

There are at least three possible answers to this question, the first of
which can be found from scanning the data given earlier. The Ameri-
canized versions of *Creve Coeur, Ferrier, Rouvre*, and many of the oth-
ers suggest the large influence simple spelling pronunciations may have
had. Undoubtedly many St. Louisans attempted to pronounce the
foreign words as they were spelled, the ultimate result being a substitu-
tion of American for foreign sounds (cf. Haugen 1950, 215, 223). And if
the street names were not commonly written down or were not encoun-
tered by people who could read, "slips of the ear" - in which a person
misunderstands something he or she has heard and thence reproduces it
incorrectly (cf. Garnes and Bond 1975, 1977, 1980; Bond and Garnes
n.d.) - could well lie at the heart of many Americanizations.

A second answer lies in the settlement history of St. Louis. Despite any
popular notions concerning American culture to the contrary, the Gate-
way City is not a great melting pot of ethnic cultures; that is, although a
good many ethnicities can be found within the city's limits, certain sec-
tions of the city are very predominantly Italian, or German, or Irish, or
Czech, etc., and this observation was even more true a century ago.
(North St. Louis contains populations of Irish - who live in an area

formerly called Kerry Patch - as well as Poles, French, and Germans; South St. Louis was settled by the Dutch - called Scrubby Dutch, after their diligence in keeping clean the white stone steps of their front porches - and the Czechs; and Southwest St. Louis is well known for its Italian population, who live on The Hill and have made Hill Day an annual Fall celebration.) Furthermore, the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were not witness to any extensive ethnic intermingling; indeed, many of my informants report that it was rare even for children who lived on the fringes of one ethnic section to play with children who lived on the fringes of the next. All of this is important for two reasons: first, because it implies that most instances of language contact would have been English-foreign rather than foreign-foreign - and with most native speakers of English being monolingual, they would have been more likely "to force the [foreign-sounding words] to conform to the native phonetic and phonemic pattern" than if those same words had been encountered by bilinguals (Fries and Pike 1949, 40).

Finally, I must note the obvious: street names, though sometimes incorporated into connected discourse, are not so incorporated always or necessarily - and when they are, the surrounding language is more likely to be the native tongue than a foreign one; they more typically occur as disconnected entities on signs and maps, and are frequently spoken in isolation as well. They can, in short, be considered "isolated loanwords," about which Weinreich (1953, 27-28) says:

> The phonic fate of isolated loanwords is the result of the same mechanisms of interference as those that govern connected speech in a secondary language. But a bilingual's connected utterance in language S, even if imperfect, must nevertheless approximate the phonemics of S sufficiently to be intelligible to its unilingual hearers. On the contrary, the use of a word borrowed from S in a P-utterance is not inhibited by the need to conform to an extraneous phonemic norm; the mechanics of interference therefore affect individual loanwords with particular force.

"Particular force" hardly seems an adequate description for "the mechanics of interference" that have played linguistic havoc with many of the street names of St. Louis, but at least Weinreich's comments help to buttress the reality of such corruptions occurring without having to call into question the mental competency of the speakers (interestingly, however, Palmer [1883, vii] defines folk etymology as "verbal pathology").

It seems appropriate, by way of conclusion, to speculate on the future of the street names that have served as the focus of this essay. I might

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begin by saying that, in general, neither the foreign orthography nor the American pronunciation of the hundreds of names I investigated shows any sign of changing. Most of the residents living on or near the streets in question, though usually aware of phonological-orthographic discrepancies, appear perfectly content to accept and even perpetuate them. And while some of these names do occur in lower or lower-middle class neighborhoods, by far the vast majority do not; thus a willingness to accept and perpetuate should not be equated with illiteracy or lack of ability to change. The corrupted names have, in many instances, become such an integral part of the personality of the neighborhoods that any intentional linguistic tinkering by outsiders would be perceived as intrusive and unwelcome. Moreover, even the befuddlement some of these names have caused to non-members of the community in which they occur - and judging from my own experiences both as a member and as a non-member, that befuddlement must be considerable - seems not to affect most residents' collective desire to retain the Americanized versions of the names. I have misled more than one unwary listener by pronouncing *Bellefontaine* as [bɛl#fawntən] (*Bell Fountain*), and will undoubtedly do so again. Apparently Palmer's (1883, xiv) judgment is correct: "man is an etymologizing animal. He abhors the vacuum of an unmeaning word."

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