From French to English: Some Observations on Patterns of Onomastic Changes in North America

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Name studies have emerged as a true discipline of convergence, drawing on and bringing together the methodologies of several disciplines, mostly in the social sciences and the humanities. In this cross-fertilization process, there has been at times a tendency to forget that the core element of onomastic studies, the proper name, is fundamentally a linguistic unit belonging to a given language system, and therefore subject to the rules that govern the evolution of that system. Here, the sociolinguistic context underlying the transformation of names from one linguistic tradition to another is examined. More specifically, this paper deals with the evolution of French placenames in English-dominant areas of North America, and proposes a linguistically-based typology to account for such an evolution.

1. Introduction

Interdisciplinarity being one of the main driving forces in name studies, it is normal that in discussions and exchanges between scholars, some degree of confusion may sometimes arise when different terminologies are used in reference to various linguistic processes that affect proper name evolution. Reference tools such as the *Technical Terminology Employed in the Standardization of Geographical Names* (United Nations 1987) or the *Lexique des termes utiles à l'étude des noms de lieux* (Dorion and Poirier 1975) play an important role in standardizing the different technical terms emerging from various disciplines, which describe the various processes that affect the evolution of names. However, there still remains a number of instances where improper terminology does not accurately describe the fundamental linguistic processes at play in name study.

A case in point is the word "corruption," which has been used by several onomastic scholars, including Harder (1976), Rennick (1984),

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Coulet Du Gard (1986), Hamilton (1996), and undoubtedly many others when describing the diachronic processes that govern the passage of a name from one form to another. There is a long tradition in the use of this expression. In French, it has been traced back as far as the early 1700s when a Jesuit missionary used the word to explain how the name *Mont-Royal* became *Montréal* (Rochemonteix 1904). One of the more interesting outcomes of the interface between onomastics and linguistics is the understanding that proper names are first and foremost integral elements of a given language, more specifically the onomasticon, and that they are bound by the same rules that govern the evolution of that language, its lexicon in particular. "Corruption" is not a concept used in the scientific study of language and therefore cannot adequately explain the various rules that come into play when a name evolves from one form to another.

Onomastics is now sufficiently established as a discipline of convergence that it can legitimately draw on linguistic terminology to describe diachronic and other processes which affect the evolution of proper names. An illustration is provided by the following brief examination of the various linguistic rules that govern the evolution of the original French stratum of place and family names in Anglo-dominant North America.

2. Background

The French colonial empire in North America began with the first settlement at *Isle Saincte-Croix* (now Saint Croix Island in the state of Maine beside the New Brunswick border) in 1604, and grew for more than 150 years as the main routes of exploration of the North American continent, rivers, lakes, forts, and trading outposts were given French names. By the mid-eighteenth century, French geographical names had covered an area extending from the Gulf of St. Lawrence to the Rocky Mountains and from Hudson Bay to the Gulf of Mexico. French settlement during this period however was more modest, being limited to Acadia, the St. Lawrence Valley and a few remote outposts such as *Le Détroit*, so that French family names did not expand as widely as geographical names during this period. A major change in the evolution of the French onomastic stratum occurred after the Treaty of Paris of 1763 by which the French colonial empire in North America came under British rule.

The British conquest signaled a long period of change for French geographical names as new waves of English-speaking settlers came to the New World and took root in North America, where they eventually formed the basis of an Anglo-dominant society. With the notable exception of the present-day province of Quebec, the cradle of French civilization in North America, contact with an English-speaking society would affect virtually all French geographical names on the continent. An excellent overview of this evolution process is provided by Gauthier Larouche (1986).

Not only can one measure the influence of the English adstratum through geographical names but it can also be observed in family names as well. Substantial French-Canadian migration movements began as early as the eighteenth century with the tragically infamous deportation of the Acadians in 1755, and continued throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as new lands were opened to settlement and industrial centers developed, especially in the northeastern United States. The most significant migration movement took place between 1840 and 1920. Close to one million Québécois left Canada and took up residence in the textile and manufacturing centers of New England, where they created several linguistic enclaves, each called "Little Canada." As they later took up American citizenship and adapted to an English-dominant environment, their family names underwent a set of changes in many ways similar to those that affected geographical names on the North American continent.

This brief overview focuses mainly on the United States and English-speaking Canada. It draws on two major sources, the extensive list of toponyms provided by Coulet du Gard (1986), and the family names listed in Forget (1949). Both works are still considered prime tools of reference in their respective areas although it is fully understood that data is far from complete and needs to be updated. In the examples provided, references to these sources will be [CG] and [UF], respectively. All other examples are drawn from my own work (1981; 1992a; 1992b) on French toponymy and anthroponymy in North America.

3. Onomastic Consequences of Language Contact

The broad sociolinguistic context in which many French names evolved from their original to their present-day form can be defined by speech community contact, an environment whereby the original French onomastic stratum was brought into contact with a progressively

dominant English-speaking society. As a result, the speakers of the dominant group had the option of either rejecting or retaining the legacy of French names. If they chose to reject this legacy, the resulting linguistic process was that of name deletion or name substitution. If, on the other hand, they opted to retain French names, then the process of retention was governed by integration rules, ranging from accommodation through translation to phoneme- or grapheme-based shifts.

3.1. Name Rejection

As the British took over the fur-trading routes, and exploration of the continent continued, names already given in French were sometimes dropped altogether. A thorough study of such deletions still has to be undertaken but it is clear that many feature names of the French colonial period did not survive the British conquest.

A comparison of eighteenth-century French and British maps shows that in many other cases, French names were replaced by English ones, in keeping with the rapidly increasing usage of English, as in:

(1) *Lac Saint-Sacrement* > Lake George (NY)
(2) *Isle de mai* > Amelia Island (FL) [CG, 24]
(3) *Pointe-aux-loups* > Iota (LA) [CG, 114]

In a somewhat similar fashion, some families from Quebec who took part in the great migration to New England were eager to integrate into their new, Anglo-dominant, environment. One way of achieving that goal was to change the French family name to an English one, as in:

(4) *Laferrière* > Shaw [UF, 36]
(5) *Roy* > Ware, Lorwell [UF, 41]
(6) *Vaillancourt* > Small [UF, 42]

The motivations that triggered these changes and the selection of English replacement names constitute a promising area of investigation, but go well beyond the scope of this brief overview. These complex issues have been examined by some scholars (Casanova 1975; Whitebook 1994) but much remains to be done as they involve interface between several disciplines.

3.2. Name Retention

A more frequent result of speech community contact was name retention that was achieved through several linguistic processes, which we will now examine.

3.2.1. Translation

The process of name translation appears to be a natural speech event. It is fairly common throughout the world and may even be considered an onomastic universal. The coexistence of thousands of languages on the globe and their sometimes close proximity provide an ideal environment for the flow of names from one language to another, especially in the case of shared geographical features. In a sense, translation is a form of accommodation whereby some of the original French stratum is retained and constitutes a cultural legacy.

Translation was an option widely used in North America by the early British explorers and merchants as they took over the main trading routes from the French. Late eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century maps show several examples of translation, as in:

(7) *Rivière Bleue* > Blue River (NE) [CG, 234]
(8) *Grands Rapides* > Grand Rapids (ND) [CG, 267]
(9) *Lac du Flambeau* > Torch Lake (MI) [CG, 175]

Anthroponymic examples are also numerous, to such an extent that name translation has sometimes been described as one of the salient features of Franco-American onomastics:

(10) *Boulanger* > Baker [UF, 30]
(11) *Maisonneuve* > Newhouse [UF, 37]
(12) *Poisson* > Fish [UF, 40]

Geographical name translations are sometimes partial, resulting in a hybrid form in which the specific is left in French, with little or no modification, while the generic is translated into English, as in:

(13) *Isle au boeuf* > Boeuf Island (MO) [CG, 210]
(14) *Rivière plate* > Platte River (CO) [CG, 20]
(15) *Rivière aux chênes* > River Aux Chene (LA) [CG, 125]

Word-to-word translation of French-Canadian family names in the Franco-American enclaves of New England sometimes produced rarely used forms in the English onomasticon. As a result, many of these names were adjusted to more familiar and more frequently used names:

(16) *Chassé* > Hunt, Hunter [UF, 31] but rarely Hunted
(17) *Jolicoeur* > Hart [UF, 35] but rarely Prettyheart
(18) *Vachon* > Cowan [UF, 42] but rarely Cow

3.2.2. Integration

By far the most interesting process is that of integration by which a French name is given an English appearance through either grapheme- or phoneme-based shifts. As mentioned earlier, this type of change has sometimes been called "corruption" by many scholars since, in the passage from French to English, the written or the sound forms of the original name are changed in such a way that they are no longer transparent. But far from being degenerations or corruptions, these alterations represent various stages of linguistic evolution, as speech communities adopt names from foreign languages and integrate them into their own. Two distinct and complementary linguistic patterns can be distinguished, depending on where the source of the change occurs.

3.2.2.1. Grapheme-Based Shift

In this type of change, a French name is passed on to English through the *written* tradition. This was often the case in cartography. Geographic names were often kept intact as they were copied from French onto English maps. Map users then read and pronounced these names according to the sound values associated with English graphemes:

(19) *Détroit* [detʀwa] > Detroit [dətɹɔjt] (MI)

(20) *Sault-Ste-Marie* [sosɛ̃tmaʀi] > Sault Ste. Marie [susejntməɹi] (MI, ON)

(21) *Coeur d'alène* [kœʀdalɛn] > Coeur d'Alene [kəɹdəlen] (ID)

In the United States, this general practice was observed as early as the mid-1800s: "...for in America it is common to give all French words used in the language, such as *route*, *tour*, etc., the pronunciation which their orthography would warrant if they were English" (Buckingham 1841, 535). The process preserved the written form of the name in the donor language (French) but at the expense of phonetic stability as graphemes were now being reinterpreted in the recipient language (English). A similar process emerged when American civil and religious authorities were called upon to register French-Canadian names in New England. Many Québécois were surprised to hear how different their names sounded when pronounced by a non-speaker of French:

(22) *Bélanger* [belɑ̃ʒe] > Belanger [bɛləndʒəɹ] [UF, 29]

(23) *Gauthier* [gotje] > Gauthier [gawʧəɹ] [UF, 34]

(24) *Gilbert* [ʒilbɛʀ] > Gilbert [gɪlbəɹt] [UF, 35]

A parallel process occurs in the English lexicon when formal loanwords from French such as *parole*, *menu*, *cul-de-sac* are blended into English. While the orthography of the donor language remains intact, the French pronunciations [parɔl], [məny], [kytsak] are modified as recipient sound values are applied to the graphemes and become [pəɹowl], [mɛnjuw], [kuldəsæk], respectively.

3.2.2.2. Phoneme-Based Shift

Conversely, when names were passed on from French to English through the *oral* tradition, they were pronounced as closely as possible to the values of the donor language, but given a new written form in the recipient language to support that pronunciation. As a result, phoneme-based shifts tended to preserve the sound features of the original French name but at the expense of the written form. The resulting written forms often provide examples of folk etymology along with what Nicolaisen (1986, 255) calls "semantic reinterpretation" of the name:

(25) [lofʀɛt] *L'eau froide* > [lofɹet] Low Freight (AR) [CG, 10]

(26) [kuʀtɔrɛj] *Courtes oreilles* > [kudəɹej] Couderay (WI) [CG, 386]

(27) [kapoʀɑzweʀ] *Cap au rasoir* > [kejpʀozwej] Cape Roseway (NS)

An early example of this process can be found in a letter written in 1700 by the Secretary for Indian Affairs at Albany, Robert Livingstone, to the Governor of New York. In referring to the French post being established at the *straight* between Lake Erie and Lake Huron, he writes: "The best way to effect this is to build a fort at Wawyachtenok called by the French DeTroett..." (O'Callaghan 1856-1861/IV, 650). It is clear that the spelling used by Livingstone reflects an oral transmission of the eighteenth-century pronunciation of the name as [detrwɛt]. However, as we have seen earlier, the name was eventually integrated into English by the alternate process of grapheme-based shift.

A similar shift took place in anthroponymy as Franco-Americans, or officials registering their names, attempted to preserve the pronunciation of the family name by rearranging the spelling to conform with English sound values, sometimes in inventive and often amusing ways:

(28) [oklɛʀ] *Auclair* >[oklɛəɹ] O'Clair [UF, 29]

(29) [vanɑs] Vanasse >[vənɑ:s] Van Aase [UF, 42]

(30) [daʒnɛ] *Dagenais* >[daʃnej] Dashney [UF, 27]

A more recent parallel can be drawn with a commercial name, *Le Groupe Danone*, a French dairy-products firm, which markets its products both in Canada and in the United States. In Canada, where both English and French are official languages, the products are marketed under the brand name *Danone* as in Europe. In the United States however, the name has become *Dannon* to conform with the English pronunciation of the name. Similarly, some names that have gone from French to English through grapheme-based shifts have undergone a change in spelling to support the English pronunciation of each name. Consider the following example:

(31) *Sault-Ste-Marie* [sosɛtmaʀi] > Sault Ste. Marie [susejntməɹi] > The Soo (MI, ON)

Sometimes both grapheme- and phoneme-based shift rules can apply to the same name. My data show that Ontario's Bois Blanc Island, a feature in the Detroit River, is a case in point. Field work in the area reveals that a grapheme-based shift affected the pronunciation of the specific element, Bois Blanc, while no change in the original orthography was recorded:

(32) *Isle au Bois Blanc* [ilobwablɑ̃] > Bois Blanc Island [bɑbloajlənd]

The archives of the Ontario Geographic Names Board show that for some time the specific has been rendered as *Bob-Lo*, indicating that a phoneme-based shift had also taken place:

(33) *Isle au Bois Blanc* > [ilobwablɑ̃] > Bob-Lo Island [bɑbloajlənd]

These examples illustrate the complementarity of grapheme- and phoneme-based shifts. If the spelling of a name from the donor language remains intact, one can expect phonetic change in the recipient language (32). Conversely, if the name pronunciation from the donor language remains relatively stable, then one can expect orthographic adjustment in the recipient language (33).

4. Conclusion

The above-mentioned processes are to be viewed more as general principles rather than a rigid set of rules. In fact, my data suggest that these principles sometimes work simultaneously, as in (32) and (33), which involve phoneme- and grapheme-based shifts of the specific as

well as the translation of the generic. Nor are these principles mutually exclusive. A family name such as *Roy* can be substituted with an entirely different name as in (5), translated into *King* or rendered as [ɹɔj] instead of [rwa] through grapheme-based shift. Finally, recent research shows that some shifts, traditionally attributed to the English adstratum, can be traced to the survival of old French dialect forms. Hamlin (1999) suggests that the specific in *Bob-Lo Island* (33) can also be traced back to the speech of the early settlers in the Detroit region.

An interesting suggestion for further study would be to investigate the universality of these processes. For instance, how did the English adstratum affect Spanish names in the United States? Many have been integrated into English through grapheme-based shifts such as *Rio Grande*, *El Paso*, *Los Angeles* and *San Francisco*, with pronunciations adjusted to English. But why does *La Jolla* not follow the same rule? The widespread use of the Spanish pronunciation [lahɔja] in California would seem to suggest that in areas where the donor language is dominant, grapheme-based shifts do not always entail a significant change of pronunciation. Another possible explanation is that the name has a regional, as opposed to a national significance.

The evolution of French geographical and family names in Anglo-dominant areas of North America shows that the shift from their original form to English was achieved through a set of linguistic processes that call into play the interaction between different writing and sound patterns. As research continues into these and related areas of onomastic contact, one can expect these rules to be revisited and refined. With linguistics and onomastics working hand in hand in this effort, it is hoped that inadequate terminology will no longer be part of the equation.

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