On the Translation of French-Canadian Family Names in English

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Many French-Canadian family names were altered when their bearers emigrated to various English-speaking areas of North America. As in the case of all the other foreign names that were anglicized for various social and linguistic reasons, different types of adaptive mechanisms were at work. The most common were purely orthographical in nature, ranging from the simple elimination of diacritics to the replacement of unfamiliar vowel and consonant sounds. Other surname modifications went beyond spelling changes and were dependent upon some notion of structural or semantic equivalence. Some were based solely on the fact that a French name sounded vaguely similar to an existing English surname while other non-orthographical substitutions involved translation. The object of this study will be to examine how this process affected French-Canadian surnames wherein this adaptive mechanism was particularly prevalent and diverse.

KEYWORDS surnames, Canadian French, anglicization, translation, processes

Introduction

There are two basic ways in which French-Canadian surnames were altered when, for largely economic reasons, their bearers ventured in droves out of Québec and Acadia into English Canada and the United States mainly during the course of the nineteenth century, though the migratory movement had started in the eighteenth and continued into the early part of the twentieth.[1] The most common type of anglicization one finds is orthographical in nature, involving either the simple elimination of diacritics, e.g., *Levesque* < *Lévesque*, *Giguere* < *Giguère*, *Cote* < *Côté*, *Lague* < *Lagüe*, *Lefrancois* < *Lefrançois*, *Dentremont* < *D'Entremont*, or an adaptation to English pronunciation, as in *Pelkey* < *Pelletier*, *Shovan* < *Chauvin*, *Tibedo* < *Thibodeau*, *Lepoint* < *Lapointe*, *Itchue* < *Hétu*.

The second type is composed of French surnames that are replaced by what are perceived to be English equivalents in some sense. On the one hand, there are substitutions which are based solely on the fact that an existing English surname sounds vaguely the same as the French original, e.g., *McQueen* < *Moquin*, *Gordon* < *Godin*,

Grant < Lagrandeur, Green < Grenier, Blair < Bélair, though sometimes these conversions are not to actual surnames but simply to ordinary English lexemes, e.g., *Donor < Daunais, Sequin < Séguin, Laundry < Landry, Companion < Compagna, Dragon < Daragon*.

On the other hand, some of these lexical substitutions are semantically based in that they constitute attempts at translation. This is the type of anglicization of French-Canadian surnames that will be the subject of this study.[2] As will be shown, this phenomenon can be divided into four categories, viz., direct translations, partial translations, near translations, and mistranslations.[3]

Direct translations

The simplest type of translation is the one where there exists a straightforward, one-to-one semantic correlation between the French and English words, phrases or given names that make up the surnames:[4] *Butterfly < Papillon, Carpenter < Charpentier, Come (Comings, Cumm, Cummings) < Viens, Fish < Poisson, Goodblood < Bonsang, Goodchild (Gutchell) < Bonenfant, Goodfriend < Bonami, Goodwill < Bonvouloir, Greenleaf < Vertefeuille, Greenwood < Boisvert, Lawrence < Laurent, Little < Petit, Loon < Huard, Merchant < Marchand, Miller < Meunier, Moses < Moïse, Nephew < Neveu, Newcity* and *Newtown (Newton) < Villeneuve, Norman < Normand, Peartree < Poirier, Root < Racine, Shortsleeve (Shortsleeves) < Courtemanche, Sylvester < Sylvestre, Welcome < Bienvenu*.

Though there may exist a slight discrepancy between the spelling of a French surname and that of its lexical origin, instances of this type can also be considered to involve a direct translation if the two forms are phonolocially identical and etymologically related. Fitting this type of process are *Buckwheat < Sarrazin (sarrasin), Carter < Chartier (charretier), Colt (Coltey, Colty) < Poulin (poulain), Drinkwine < Boivin (bois vin), Glad (Gladd) < Contant (content), King < Roy (roi), Nice < Joly (joli)*, to which we may add a number of names where the initial *St(e)* is pronounced the same as its lexical source *saint(e)*, e.g., *Saintdennis (Stdennis) < St-Denis, Saintfrancis (Stfrancis) < St-François, Saintgeorge (Stgeorge) < St-Georges, Saintjames (Stjames) < St-Jacques, Saintjohn (Stjohn) < St-Jean, Saintlawrence (Stlawrence) < St-Laurent, Saintmary (Stmary) < Ste-Marie, Saintpeter (Saintpeters, Stpeter, Stpeters) < St-Pierre*. The opposite scenario whereby the translated surname is the one that does not correspond exactly to its lexical counterpart can be found in *Garrett (garret) < Grenier*.

Partial translations

Most of the surnames that fit into this category involve the determiners *le* "the (masculine)," *la* "the (feminine)" and *l'* "the (prevocalically)." On the one hand, they may remain as such in the English adaptations while the rest of the name undergoes a direct translation. Examples are *Lacross (Lacrosse) < Lacroix, Laforrest < Laforest, Lafountain (Lafountaine) < Lafontaine, Lajoy (Lajoye) < Lajoie, Lamountain < Lamontagne, Lapearl < Laperle, Lavalley < Lavallée, Leblue (Lablue) < Lebleu, Lecount (Lacount) < Lecompte (< Lecomte), Legray (Lagray) < Legris*.

On the other hand, the determiners may simply be omitted as in *Bird < L'oiseau*, *Bishop < Lévesque*, *Brown < Lebrun*, *Cross < Lacroix*, *Goodness (Goodniss) < Labonté*, *Happy < L'Heureux*, *Hope < Lespérance*, *Luck < Lachance*, *Needle (Needle) < Laiguille*, *Page (Paige) < Lepage*, *Raspberry (Rasberry) < Laframboise*, *Stone < Lapierre* and *Laroche*, *Tulip < Latulippe*, *White < Leblanc*, *Wideawake < Léveillé*, *Young < Lejeune*. This type of deletion always occurs when names begin with the preposition + determiner combinations *du (< de le)* "from the (singular)" and *des (< de les)* "from the (plural)," e.g., *Ash (Ashe) < Dufresne*, *Cedar < Ducèdre*, *Oven < Dufour*, *Strong < Dufort*, *Wood < Dubois*, *Fields < Deschamps*.

Most of the remaining instances of partial translation have in common the fact that only the last word or name is kept in the English adaptation. Thus, we find *Anthony < St-Antoine*, *Dennis < St-Denis*, *Leaf < Bellefeuille*, *Mitchell < St-Michel*, *Wedge < Aucoin*, *Wood < Gadbois*, *Woods < Charlebois* and *Gadbois*. The only exceptions to this process that have been found are *Gadwood* from *Gadbois* where the meaningless first syllable is allowed to remain, *Goodheart (Goodhart)* from *Vadeboncoeur* where the last two words are translated, and *Cole < Charbonneau* where only *charbon* "coal" is orthographically approximated.

Near translations

In contradistinction to the names listed in the previous section in which the translated parts are exact renderings of the original elements, there are others where the correlation between French and English is an approximation of some sort, though always in the same semantic area. The simplest cases are those that involve a change in number, i.e., from singular to plural or vice versa, most often with the concomitant omission of initial prepositions and determiners observed in the partial translations above, as in *Gates < Barrière* from *barrière* "gate," *Hickory < Desnoyers* from *noyers* "hickories," *Hill < Descôteaux* from *côteaux* "hills," *Rivers < Larivière* from *rivière* "river," *Rosebush < Desrosiers* from *rosiers* "rosebushes," *Stone < Desroches* from *roches* "stones," *Threehouse < Destroismaisons* from *trois maisons* "three houses," *Wells < Dupuis* from *puits* "well," *Woods < Dubois* from *bois* "wood."

A less prevalent type of near translation is comprised of agglutinated French names only one element of which is rendered faithfully in English: *Fairfield < Beauchamp* from *beau champ* "beautiful field," *Goodnature < Belhumeur* from *belle humeur* "good mood," *Goodroad (Goodrode) < Beauchemin* from *beau chemin* "beautiful road," *Walker < Marcheterre* from *marche à terre* "walks on the ground."

Finally, there are translated surnames that simply contain a lexically related element which may or may not be in the same word class. These are *Ashley < Lafrenière* from Old French *fresniere* "ash grove," *Betters < Lemieux* from *le mieux* "the best," *Lander < Therrien* from *(propriétaire) terrien* "landowner," *Fisher < Poisson* from *poisson* "fish," *Gardner (Gardiner) < Desjardins* from *jardins* "gardens," *Gooseberry < Desgroseilliers* from *groseilliers* "gooseberry bushes," *Heald < Talon* from *talon* "heel" where the English form is homophonous with *heeled*, *Hunter < Chassé* from *chassé* "hunted," *Miller < Dumoulin* from *moulin* "mill," *Moen < Faucher* from *faucher* "to mow" where the English form is homophonous with *mowin'*, *Nailor (Naylor) < Cloutier* from *cloutier* "nail maker, nail seller," *Spooner < Cuillerier* from

Old French *cuillerier* "spoon maker, spoon seller," *Surprise* (*Supprise*, *Supri*, *Suprise*, *Supry*) < *Surprenant* from *surprenant* "surprising," *Walker* < *Lamarche* from *marche* "walk, walking," *Wheel* < *Rouet* (*Rouette*) from *rouet* "spinning wheel," *Young* < *Lajeunesse* from *jeunesse* "youth."

Mistranslations

These can be divided into two broad categories. One is where a bona fide French word or phrase is rendered in English by a complete or partial form that means something different. For example, we find *Blackbird* < *Létourneau* from *étourneau* "starling," *Farmer* (*Pharmer*) < *Therrien* from (*propriétaire*) *terrien* "landowner," *Flagg* < *Papillon* from *papillon* "butterfly" misconstrued as *pavillon* "flag," *Freeheart* (*Freehart*) < *Généreux* from *généreux* "generous," *Goodwater* < *Bonneau* from *bon* "good" and the diminutive suffix *-eau* the combination of which is homophonous with *bonne eau* "good water," *Hart* < *Francoeur* from *franc coeur* "brave heart," *Jolicoeur* from *joli coeur* "tender heart" or *Vadeboncoeur* from *va de bon coeur* "goes with a brave heart," *Newvine* < *Villeneuve* from *ville neuve* "new city" misconstrued as *vigne neuve* "new vine," *Peach* < *Poirier* from *poirier* "pear tree," *Smart* < *Léveillé* from *éveillé* "lively, alert," *Steady* < *Tranquille* from *tranquille* "quiet," *Taylor* < *Couturier* from *couturier* "fashion designer."

The second type of faulty translation involves word associations whereby French names containing synchronically meaningless lexemes, and even mere syllables, are associated with actual like-sounding words and rendered in English as such. Thus, we find *Brooks* < *Rousseau* from either Old French *rous* "red-haired" and the diminutive suffix *-eau* or the placename (*Le*) *Rousseau* translated as *ruisseaux* "brooks," *Counter* < *Contois* from *Comtois*, a native of Franche-Comté in France, associated with a derivative of *compter* "to count" such as *compteur* or *comptoir*, *Cowan* < *Vachon* derived from *vache* "cow" which has nothing to do with the anglicized Irish name, *Fish* and *Fisher* < *Poissant* from Old French *poissant* "powerful" likened to *poisson* "fish," *Lively* and *Playful* < *Joyal* from Old French *joiel* "joyous" from which *joy* is extracted and associated with liveliness and playfulness, *Quarter* < *Cartier* from regional French *carretier* "carter" or the placename (*Le*) *Cartier* interpreted as *quartier* "quarter," *Rocker* < *Bercier* from regional French *bercier* "shepherd" associated with *bercer* "to rock," *Salter* < *Salois* of undetermined origin linked to *saleur* "salter," *Spruce* < *Pinette* from the placename (*Le*) *Pinet* associated with *épinette* "spruce tree."

While the mistranslations listed above are all based on complete French surnames, others are only effected on parts of them. Such are, for example, *Bean* (*Beane*) < *Lefebvre* from Old French *fe(b)vre* "blacksmith" interpreted as *fève* "bean," *Foote* < *Frappier* from either a variant of Old French *frepier* "secondhand clothes dealer" or the placename (*Le*) *Frappier* with the syllable *-pier* being associated with the homophonous word *pied* "foot," *Salt* (*Sault*) < *Decelle* from the placename *Celle* homophonous with *sel* "salt," *Sister* (*Sisters*) < *Levasseur* from Old French *vasseur* "vassal" with the syllable *-seur* associated with the homophonous word *soeur* "sister," *Spooner* < *Lécuyer* from *écuyer* "squire" with *-cuyer* suggestive of *cuiller* "spoon," *Tucker* < *Beauparlant* from *beau parlant* "smooth talker" with a potential *Talker* altered to the like-sounding *Tucker*, *Turner* < *Létourneau* from *étourneau*

"starling" with -*tourneau* evocative of *tourneur* "turner," *Wheeler* < *Leroux* from *roux* "red-haired" confounded with its homophone *roue* "wheel."

Conclusion

The anglicization of surnames through translation is not unique to those of French-Canadian origin. For instance, many German and Jewish surnames were altered in this way, e.g., *Fox* < *Fuchs*, *Firestone* < *Feuerstein*, *Brown* < *Braun*, *Friend* < *Freund*, *Black* < *Schwartz*, *Taylor* < *Schneider*, *Milliron* < *Mühleisen*, *Miller* < *Müller*, *Carpenter* < *Zimmermann*, *Butcher* < *Metzger*.

The major difference, however, is that the vast majority of the latter consist of direct translations in contradistinction to those that were examined in this study where all sorts of other mechanisms were found to be at work. In addition, the number of French-Canadian family names that were translated and not simply orthographically altered appears to have been proportionately much higher than those of any other nationality.[5] Finally, it should also be noted that this phenomenon was not restricted geographically in any way, occurring as it did everywhere Acadians and Québécois emigrated, notably in New England, Ontario, the Midwest, and Louisiana.[6]

While it is unclear why translation should have been comparatively so widespread in the case at hand, there is every indication that the reasons for the massive anglicization of French-Canadian surnames are basically the same as those that were at play in the alteration of Jewish names in North America, for example. As outlined by Kaganoff, "[t]hree principal reasons can be observed — a desire to eliminate a difficult name that differs from the general linguistic pattern; a desire to hide one's ethnic and religious background; or a desire to avoid a name which has unpleasant connotations, evokes ridicule, etc." (1977: 74). In sum, if "name changing is an attempt of the individual to integrate with society" (1977: 73–74), then one can only conclude that French-Canadians had a very strong compulsion to do this in the sea of *anglophonie* that surrounded them.

Notes

[1] For the sociohistorical background and sociolinguistic factors involved in this mass emigration, see Brault (1986), Lapierre (1991), and references therein.

[2] This phenomenon was addressed by Whitebook (1994) but there was no attempt on her part to exhaustively and systematically categorize translated family names as will be done here. Instead, her study was mainly about how and why immigrants selected, and often later rejected, translations of their surnames.

[3] There is actually a third type which consists of linguistically haphazard alterations the motivation for which is basically unrecoverable and which cannot be accounted for in any systematic way, e.g., *Ward* < *Benoît*, *Carey* < *Busque*, *Leo* < *Charpentier*,

Hoskins < *Durepos*, *Luro* < *Sirois*, *Stewart* < *Marcoux*, *Moore* < *Populus*, *Pease* < *Therrien*, *Smart* < *Vaillancourt*.

[4] It is important to note that the meanings attributed to many translated French names do not correspond to their etymology but simply bear an accidental resemblance to synchronically transparent forms. For example, the origin of *Gaucher* is the Germanic name *Walhari* (< *wahl* "stranger" and *hari* "army"), but this name would nowadays be ineluctably interpreted as *gaucher* "left-handed" and translated along those lines. For the exact derivation of the French-Canadian names in this study, see Picard (2010).

[5] Lest one suppose that this might have something to do with French as one of the languages involved, a

significant number of foreign names, and especially those of English and German origin, were frenchified in Québec (see Picard 2007; 2008; 2010), but only a handful were actually altered through any sort of translation, viz., *Longpré* < *Longley* (both meaning "long meadow") and *Decoeur* < *Hart* (interpreted as "heart") from English, *Tailleur* < *Schneider* (both meaning "tailor") and *Serrurier* < *Schloss* (with "lock" rendered as "locksmith") from German, and *L'Étoile* < *Stalla* (with *stalla* "stable" misinterpreted as *stella* "star") from Italian.

6   Additional evidence of just how pervasive and widespread the translation process was lies in the fact the same surname can often be found to have been identically rendered in more than one place. For example, the alteration of *Roy* to *King* was effected independently in Michigan, Wisconsin, Maine, Ontario, New York, and New Brunswick, that of *Boisvert* to *Greenwood* in Ohio, Illinois, New Hampshire, Michigan, Massachusetts, New York, and Kansas, and that of *Leblanc* to *White* in New Brunswick, Maryland, Michigan, Vermont, Illinois, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Connecticut. All in all, at least one-third of every translated family name occurred in more that one area according to the genealogical data at the website <www.Ancestry.com> on which most of the translated names were found.

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