Place-Names in Bilingual Communities

W.F.H. NICOLAISEN

If one defines bilingualism, in Martinet's words, as "divided linguistic allegiance"[1] or paraphrases it with Weinreich as "the practice of alternately using two languages,"[2] considerable interference or deviation can reasonably be expected to occur in both languages—phonological, morphological, lexical, and syntactical. On the other hand, since bilingualism is the linguistic expression or vehicle of bi-culturalism, one must not ignore extra-linguistic factors which may come into play. Presumably not even a vowel change and the systemic adjustments which such a change could cause are linguistic phenomena only, and certainly the adoption of words and the concomitant rearrangements of lexical fields should be considered as part of a larger extra-linguistic socio-cultural reorganization.

Because toponymic material is often transferred from one language to another, the name-scholar is especially interested in such a comprehensive approach to bilingualism. In fact, it is probable that the multilayered sequence of names on a contemporary map results from periods of bilingualism embedded in socio-cultural contact. Otherwise, each new dominant language would, in isolation, have had to create from scratch a new onomastic system, naming each geographical feature afresh, whether natural or man-made, from its own lexical resources.

It is especially significant that names can have onomastical meaning even when they have ceased to have any lexical meaning. Instant lexical meaninglessness, as well as instant morphological opacity, usually results from onomastic transfer, thus creating the possibility for etymological re-interpretation and morphological re-analysis. This is a process which may be repeated several times, so that, from the second linguistic contact situation on, the transferred name is semantically and morphologically opaque even in the donor language.

Thus names are exposed to more interference in their transfer from one language to another than are more "ordinary" loan words. Whether lexically meaningful at the moment of transfer or not (i.e., from the point of view of the donor language), they are, if not translated, bound to become immediately part of a loosely structured set of symbols whose only outside semantic reference is to this village, this farm, this river,

[1] Uriel Weinreich, *Languages in Contact* (The Hague: Mouton, 1966), p. vii.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 1.

this mountain, this boulder on this shore on this side of this island, without perceivable links with the lexicon of the recipient language, either in form or in meaning. It is only this onomastic quality which integrates a transferred name into a new onomastic field, whereas it may well have had lexical and even morphological contact with the vocabulary of the previous language. The loan-name as well as the loanword initially leads a precarious existence in its new linguistic habitat, but its semantic opacity on the word level makes it less vulnerable to interference from competing elements in a new language, and soon becomes its strength rather than its weakness.

Although the historically inclined omomastician is naturally more interested in interference phenomena associated with name transfers, it cannot be taken for granted that name transfer has to take place at all. Incoming (later) languages do not only fill certain gaps left in the onomastic system of the established (earlier) languages; they inherit only fragments, some larger, some smaller, of the existing system and therefore have to replace toponymic items.

It would be rash to make generalized predictions as to which names will be transferred and which will not, but there is certainly sufficient evidence to conclude that, at least in certain phases of human settlement history, river-names had a good chance of being taken over by the incoming language, since watercourses played important roles as means of communication, boundaries, obstacles, providers of life-giving water and alluvial soil, and so on. However, even in the sphere of hydronymic usage, much depends on the socio-cultural context in which linguistic contact is made, as, for instance, the river-nomenclature of the United States indicates. In more general terms, it is obvious that onomastic transfer and onomastic innovation both occur in any given bilingual situation; any assertion beyond such a neutral statement would be highly speculative, because we lack the empirical data for any more detailed prediction. In particular, we still lack enough studies to demonstrate the toponymic range of knowledge of language communities, as well as of individuals within such communities; this is especially true of bilingual groups and individuals.

In order to list and describe the behavior of place-names under real conditions, illustrations will be chosen from the language contact which is best known to the present writer, i.e., that of Gaelic and English in Scotland. What we still need is, of course, a comprehensive survey of similar contact situations elsewhere,[3] let us say in Finland, Ireland, the Bretagne, Quebec, Nova Scotia, and Louisiana, but for the time being

[3] The best publication to date seems to me, in this respect, to be Henri Dorion and Christian Morissonneau, eds., *Les noms de lieux et le contact des langues—Place Names and Language Contact* (Quêbec: Les Presses de l'Universitê Laval, 1972), although it is only a loosely structured collection of articles linked by the same theme.

examples from one particular context will have to suffice. The mutual influence of Gaelic and English in Scotland is quite useful to study, for the two languages have been in contact in various parts of the country since the twelfth century. Such contact still occurs in the Hebrides and certain limited areas of the adjacent Scottish mainland. In the rest of Scotland, every new and meaningful place-name coined is now of English origin.

The current Scottish scene provides a number of different categories illustrative of the various basic relationships between the place-nomenclature of one language and that of another in a bilingual context. These can be documented as follows:

(a) The two names for the same place are completely unrelated to each other, illustrated by such doublets as the North Uist names *Baile MhicPhail* (Gaelic) "Macphail's farm" and *Newton* (English); *Port nan Long* (Gaelic) "Ships' Harbour" and *Newtonferry* (English). Other unconnected names are *Caithness* and *Gallaibh*; *Sutherland* and *Cataibh; Hebrides* and *Innse Gall; Scotland* and *Alba; Campbeltown* (Argyllshire) and *Ceannloch; St. Andrews* (Fife) and *Cill Rimhinn; Fort William* (Inverness-shire) and *An Gearasdan; Fort Augustus* (Inverness-shire) and *Cill Chuimein; Janetown* (Ross-shire) and *Torr nan Clar; Helmsdale* (Sutherland) and *Bun Ilidh; Rothesay* (Bute) and *Baile Bhoid,* to list just some of the more prominent examples. A peculiar case is the doublet *Brodick* (English) and *Traigh a' Chaisteil* (Gaelic) in the island of Arran, in which the English name is of Scandinavian origin, reflecting a Norse *Breið-vik* "Broad Bay," which may have survived because of map influence. In this category, each half of the doublet belongs strictly to the onomastic system of one language and cannot be used by the other, so that even a bilingual individual will not normally interchange them. Numerically it is probably one of the smallest groups of names, but since such independent pairs frequently designate sizeable topographic features and locations, their importance is much greater than their number indicates. Despite this demonstrable onomastic non-interference, the names involved are, of course, subject to any general systemic and phonological changes.

(b) The name in one language is a translation or part-translation of the name in the other language; this appears to be the result of the closest contact between speakers of the two languages concerned, with the incoming language usually being required to do the translating, as in another North Uist name, *Cearamh Meadhonach* (Gaelic), which is *Middlequarter* in English, or the Ross-shire *An t-Eilean Dubh,* which is the *Black Isle* in English. Originally, the Argyllshire *Campbeltown,* mentioned above, was called *Lochhead* in English, a translation of Gaelic *Ceannloch* (*Chille Chiarain*), before being renamed in 1667. A part-translation may be *Boat of Garten* (Inverness-shire) from *Coit*

Ghartain, and in at least one case the translation may have gone in the other direction so that English *Peterhead* (Aberdeenshire) was rendered in Gaelic as *Ceann Phadruig*. Full translations form a much smaller group than might be imagined, undoubtedly a result of the onomastic nature of these names which does not call for transparent lexical meaning and even ignores it when it is accessible.

(c) The name in one language is a phonological adaptation of the name in the other language; by definition such a name becomes instantly meaningless in the receiving language. (It may, of course, also have been without lexical meaning in the donor language.) Phonological adaptation may be called the prototype of onomastic transfer; it clearly is the most common toponymic phenomenon in linguistic contact, and documentation for this kind of doublet therefore abounds as, for instance, in *Ben Lee* (Uist) for *Beinn Liath*; *Sleat* (Skye) for *Sleibhte*; *Rannoch* (Argyllshire-Perthshire) for *Raineach; Banff* (Banffshire) for *Banbh;* or *Drumnadrochit* (Inverness-shire) for *Druim na Drochaid.* The Scottish map contains literally thousands of such Anglicized names. Naturally, the limited number of written symbols available in ordinary English orthography is not always adequate to represent the phonological changes fully and unambiguously. *Sleat*, for example, stands for [sle:t], which is much closer to the original Gaelic than the non-local spelling pronunciation [sli:t] often heard nowadays. It is noteworthy but perhaps not surprising that the systematic investigation of such adaptations, or more specifically Anglicizations, which have, after all, been happening for hundreds of years, has never really been attempted for purposes of historical linguistic research in Scotland. Such an undertaking would demand a thorough knowledge of the phonemic systems of both languages (and their dialects) and would require a detailed investigation of all phonological interference phenomena, both with regard to individual sounds, suprasegmental features, and the overall shape of each name.

(d) The name in one language is phonologically adapted by the other, as under (c), but a morphological "translation" adds a plural marker in the receiving language (English) because the name had been in the plural in the donor language (Gaelic). This must be the origin of quite a number of Scottish place-names ending in an otherwise curious and inexplicable *-s.* The notion of "more than one" was apparently dominant enough to be transferred even when the name had become semantically opaque. Usually, under these circumstances, the English *-s* is added to the phonologically (and orthographically) reshaped Gaelic singular, as in *The Trossachs,* which stands for Gaelic *Na Trosaichean* "the cross-hills." Similarly, *Largs* (Ayrshire) can be explained only as an English plural of Gaelic *learg* "slope." *Leuchars* (Fife) represents an English plural of Gaelic *luachar* "rush, rushes." *Fetters* in the same parish

(*Fotheris* 1536; *Fethers* 1588) must be based on Gaelic *fothair* "slope," paralleled by *Foithear* (on Loch Ness-side), of which the English form *Foyers* shows a plural while the underlying Gaelic name does not. *Lawers*, on Loch Tay, together with *Ben Lawers*, reflects the fact that there are three divisions of this community: *Labhar Shios* "East Lawers," *Labhar Shuas* "West Lawers," and *Labhar na Craoibh* "Lawers of the Tree." In *Binns* (West Lothian) an English plural *-s* has been added to Gaelic *beinn*, dative-locative of *beann* "peak." Although frequently an echo of a Gaelic plural, these names are consequently not always paralleled by or derived from such forms. In a couple of instances, English spelling devices have obscured the presence of a final *-s*. *Lix* (Perthshire), so often associated in the popular mind with a Roman milestone bearing the numerals *LIX*, is in reality the English plural of Gaelic *lic*, dative-locative of *leac* "flagstone, hard slope." There are Lower, Upper, and Mid Lic. The rhyming *Stix*, in the same area, reflects Gaelic *Na Stuiceannan* "the stocks or stumps."

(e) As a consequence of (c), i.e., phonological adaptation and resulting lexical meaninglessness, the receiving language adds a generic of its own which tautologically repeats a generic already contained in the adopted name. Like (a) and (c), this is a process which can happen several times in succession when different languages come into contact with each other over a long stretch of time. There is therefore no shortage of illustrative material, like *Point of Ardnamurchan*, in which the English word *point* pleonastically expresses the meaning of Gaelic *ard* "promontory." In *Glenborrodale* (Ardnamurchan) and *Glencripesdale* (Morvern), Gaelic *gleann* "valley" repeats Norse *dalr*, both of which appear on the map in the Anglicized form, of course. Similar Gaelic-Norse tautologies are contained in the names *Eilean Shona*, at the entrance to Loch Moidart, and *Loch Moidart* and *Loch Sunart*. In the first, both Gaelic *eilean* and Norse *ey* mean "island," and in the latter two, both Gaelic *loch* and *-art* from Norse *fjorðr* signify "an inlet, a sea-loch." In the map-names *Lussa River* and *River Forsa* (both in Mull), there appears to be a gap in the sequence (compare *Brodick Bay* in Arran), since English *river* and Norse *à* (and in Arran, of course, English *bay* and Norse *vík*) mean the same thing, but undoubtedly *river* is in both cases a translation of Gaelic *abhainn*, as local oral tradition proves. A name in which three languages participate in a tautology is *Ardtornish Point*, which applies to a peninsula jutting out from Morvern into the Sound of Mull; in this case, Norse *nes*, Gaelic *-ard*, and English *point*, in that chronological order, all refer to the same promontory. It should be stressed that these names are not to be considered as part-translations in which the translated element has not been replaced but has been allowed to remain. In fact, the element of translation is so conspicuously absent in such names, because of the reduction of what

were originally compound names to simple ones, that the generics are no longer recognized. Whereas *Fishnish Point* (Mull) is an example of tautological duplication, the neighboring *Fishnish Bay* shows that the onomastic item *Fishnish* is understood as a new, meaningless unit without lexical reference. Similarly, the settlement names *Glenmore* and *Kentra* have produced the new combinations *Glenmore River* and *Bay*, and *Kentra Bay* and *Moss*, respectively, in which neither Gaelic *gleann* "valley" nor *traigh* "shore" figure as meaningful elements.

(f) The name in the outgoing (usually earlier) language is not in any way adapted, translated, or replaced by the incoming (usually later) language. This is often true of very minor names like those of fishing-rocks on the seashore or names of small features in now depopulated areas in which all linguistic continuity is lost. Such lack of correspondence results either in the more or less temporary retention of the name in the onomastic system of the outgoing language or/and in its complete loss, an attrition process which is, of course, not limited to bilingual situations. Potential examples would be from Illeray, the northern part of Baleshare on the west side of North Uist, *Bruthach an t-Samsain* "Samson's Brae," where, according to local tradition, a very strong man is supposed to have lived in the past; or *Cnoc a Pheursa* "Signal-pole Hillock," which is a reminder that the men of the community used to be called by the hoisting of a signal of some kind (*peursa*) on a pole, to gather there to arrange the distribution of seaweed.[4] On the coast not far from the Butt of Lewis we find *Bodha Dhomhnuill Bhàin* "the (submerged) rock of Fair Donald" and *Geodha nan seann duine* "the old men's bay," and up in the hills of the parish of Barvas on the same island is *Allt nan Uan* "the stream of the lambs." These five names and thousands of others apply to very small features and are not recorded on any map, but can still be recovered from local oral tradition. Frequently, they are only known to one or two people, and the likelihood of their survival even within the dwindling Gaelic-speaking community is extremely small. They are, of course, paralled by English names given to features for which no Gaelic name ever existed, because the sociocultural setting did not have any demand for them.

Sometimes several of the above processes (except *f*) are involved in producing a totally new name-type in the incoming language, a type which might never have been created spontaneously without this linguistic interaction. A particularly instructive case in point, of which one example (*Boat of Garten*) has already been mentioned, is that of English names containing the preposition *of*.[5] These are particularly

[4] See Ian Fraser, "The Place-Names of Illeray," *Scottish Studies*, 17 (1973), 155-61.

[5] For a detailed account of such names, see W.F.H. Nicolaisen, "Scottish Place-Names: 10. The Type '*Burn of-*' in Scottish Hydronymy," *Scottish Studies*, 3 (1959), 92-102; "Scottish Place-Names: 15. Names Containing the Preposition *of*," *Scottish Studies*, 4 (1960), 194-205; "Scottish Place-Names: 25. '*Hill of-*' and '*Loch of-*,'" *Scottish Studies*, 9 (1965), 175-82.

common in the combinations *Burn of X, Water of X, Hill of X, Mains of X, Mill of X, Bridge of X,* and so forth. As a morphological type they are peculiar from an English point of view, insofar as they reverse the usual Germanic word order in compound names by putting the generic first and the specific last, while linking the two with the preposition *of.* For example, **Deskford Burn* would be English (Germanic), but the *Burn of Deskford* (Banffshire) is not; similarly **Cairnbrock Mains* would exhibit English word order, but *Mains of Cairnbrock* (Wigtownshire) does not, and so on. The geographical distribution of this type of name, as well as the availability of an appropriate Gaelic model—*Allt a' Chaorainn* (Ross-shire) "rowantree burn," *Cnoc a' Pheursa* (North Uist) "Signal-pole hill"—is a strong indication of morphological interference by Gaelic on English (especially Lowland Scots). Thus a new kind of name compound is created which, in Scotland anyhow, does not seem to have come into existence by spontaneous genesis in an English-speaking, monolingual context. The new type became so productive within the morphological system that it began to be created independent of its Gaelic model and ultimately also migrated as an English name-type with speakers of English to the Norse-speaking Northern Isles (Shetland and Orkney).

Different, although related, is the process by which linguistic transfer combined with phonological adaptation not only results in semantic opacity but also in loss of morphological transparency, which permits names to be reinterpreted in the new linguistic medium. A case in point are the many *Auchen-* or *Auchin-* names on the Scottish map, like *Auchenbrain* and *Auchinleck* in Ayrshire. These have their legitimate origin in Gaelic names containing the following sequence: generic *Achadh* "a field" plus definite article plus specific element. As such, Aberdeenshire place-names like *Auchentend* (from Gaelic *Achadh an teine* "field of fire"), *Auchinbo* (from Gaelic *Achadh na bo* "cow field"), or *Auchintoul* (from Gaelic *Achadh an t-sabhail* "field of the barn") are genuine examples of a phonological adaptation process which led to the representation of Gaelic *achadh* + definite article (either the genitive plural or a variant of the genitive singular containing an *-n-*), in Anglicized orthography. In the Scottish south,[6] however, we also find *Auchen-* before personal names in the genitive, as in *Auchenfedrick* (Dumfriesshire), from Gaelic *Achadh Phàdruig* "Patrick's field," and even before adjectives, such as *Auchenroy* (Ayrshire), containing Gaelic *ruadh* "red," *Auchenbegg* (Lanarkshire), from Gaelic *beag* "small," *Auchenreoch* (Kirkcudbrightshire), from Gaelic *riabhach* "brindled," or *Auchenbrack* (Dumfriesshire), from Gaelic *breac* "speckled." In these names the second syllable *-en-* has no place. It is just possible that

[6] This problem is discussed in context in W.F.H. Nicolaisen, "Gaelic Place-Names in Southern Scotland," *Studia Celtica*, 5 (1970), 15-35.

this development took place during the end phase of Gaelic in medieval southern Scotland, when inflexional features may have been breaking down within its grammatical structure, but the more likely explanation is that a post-bilingual period is responsible for the unwarranted intrusion. The Anglicized form *Auchen-* must have been regarded by non-Gaelic speakers as a fixed morphological element, having become an indivisible unit which served as a kind of pseudo-generic in English, with no definable lexical meaning apart from a vague feeling of onomastic appropriateness. *Auchenfedrick* has, of course, been explained as a plural formation *Achaidhean Phàdruig* "Patrick's fields," and a diminutive *achadhan* has been invoked for *Auchenreoch* "little brindled field," but it would indeed be strange if in almost every case in which an adjective forms the second element, either a plural or a diminutive were to have been used instead of a simple, unmodified singular *achadh.* It is therefore preferable to ascribe this phenomenon to a levelling process resulting from post-bilingual formal reanalysis, rather than to a phonologically correct reflex of the original monoglot Gaelic form.

As becomes apparent from our Scottish material, the behavior of place-names in bilingual communities, although not totally unpredictable, is subject to a complexity of factors, not all of which have their origin or explanation in intra-linguistic or inter-linguistic processes. Most easily isolated are non-related pairs of names, but a number of "rules" governing phonological transfer and its consequences can also be identified with certainty. Names, which exist only in one language and have no equivalent—non-related or transferred—in the other, raise considerable problems without telling us much about onomastic interference in language contact situations. Neither they nor the unrelated name promote the continuity of naming in a series of language replacements over a considerable period of time. It is the transferred name, rendered lexically meaningless and morphologically opaque, which guarantees this continuity and which demonstrates a power of survival for names not shared by ordinary words. The extent and nature of such transfers depends on many factors which can still be studied in contemporary bilingual communities. That such factors be subjected to a detailed description and analysis is one of the desiderata advocated by the evidence. Otherwise their historical counterparts will remain elusive and their interpretation highly speculative. Even without such historical considerations, however, the systematic investigation of the onomastic aspects of bi-lingualism are a requirement which can no longer be denied.

The State University of New York at Binghamton