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Item Type	Article
Authors	Parkin, Harry;Coates, Richard
Citation	Coates, R., & Parkin, H. (2025). Continuing the "Family Names of the UK" project. <i>Onomastica Uralica</i> , 22, 13-22. Retrieved from: https://mnytud.arts.unideb.hu/onomural/nyitolapa.html
Publisher	Onomastica Uralica
Journal	Onomastica Uralica
Download date	2026-06-13 18:25:37
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/10034/629832

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Continuing the “Family Names of the UK” Project

1. Introduction

The first two phases of the Family Names of the United Kingdom project (FaNUK 1 and 2), funded by the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council [AHRC], both had as their central goal to explain the linguistic origin of all family names (surnames) found in Britain and Ireland that had more than 20 bearers in 1881 and/or more than 100 in 2011. The latter set included large numbers originating outside the UK. Our explanations also needed to take into account a wide range of geographical, historical and demographic factors such as social structure and migration. Our primary goal was fully achieved by December 2016. The fruits of the first funded phase (2010–2014) were edited by PATRICK HANKS, RICHARD COATES and PETER MCCLURE and published as *The Oxford Dictionary of Family Names in Britain and Ireland* (2016) [ODFaNBI] in print, e-book and online form. Negotiations for publication of the findings of the second funded phase (2014–2016) and the findings of much additional work done after the formal end of the project began shortly afterwards. A *Concise* edition of the dictionary, edited by HARRY PARKIN, was published by Oxford University Press in 2021.

One premise of the present paper is that, despite the routine presence of errors in sources, some inroads can be made into the residue of names that remained unexplained. The other premise is that interrogation of the mass of data so far assembled can be sufficient to provide insights into questions beyond philology.

During the two FaNUK projects, many millions of dated and localized pieces of surname information were assembled and stored in electronic form in the research database. Many others were found to be systematically web-accessible and processable. Based on these, well over half the roughly 46,000 explanations in the *Dictionary* are new in some way, often radically new. Almost all the explanations are better documented than ever before. Many surname-forms had never been explained at all before FaNUK. We believe that this wealth of computationally tractable information can be exploited further to improve academic and public knowledge about UK anthroponymy and to develop materials useful for genealogists, linguists, and historians. Given what has been achieved so far, the names that have already been treated are ripe for further analysis. This paper sets out some ideas for clearly delimited research



topics that would motivate and underpin such new analysis, starting with an attempt to achieve greater understanding of the formal variation already identified among surnames that are related to each other.

2. The relation of surname variation to linguistic variation

The FaNUK project's chief etymological consultant, Prof. Peter McClure, has suggested (based on ideas expressed in MCCLURE 2013 and 2014) that any continuation of the project should address the theme of variation in the form of surnames, from both linguistic and sociocultural perspectives. The study of such relationships situates the project within the fields of sociolinguistics and socio-onomastics, while also being informed by history and demography. Such a multidisciplinary approach to surname study is not particularly common, but its advantages have been amply demonstrated by scholars such as the Yorkshiremen DAVID HEY (2000) and especially GEORGE REDMONDS (2015).

The linguistic dimension of such a project would have five aspects, unified by the idea of analysing what we will call collectively *non-canonical changes*, which we now set out in detail, focusing on English names. We will return to the wider purposes of any such analysis in due course.¹ The goals would include establishing any regional, and where possible any social and/or educational, basis of any such patterns.

2.1. *Surname variation involving alternating vowel length or diphthongization*, as in the etymologically related pairs *Sim* vs. *Sime*, *Batt* vs. *Bate*, *Godrich* vs. *Goodrich*. The causes and dialectology of this frequent variation type have never been investigated.

2.2. *Surname variation showing mechanical or acoustic phonetic variants that are typical of informal speech*. We know from the established surname clusters that written forms, throughout the history of English, show considerable variation, which is sometimes phono-orthographically unpredictable. As a result, surname data offers historical linguists an additional source of primary evidence for phonetic variation and orthographic tradition, and can fill in many gaps in our knowledge with regard to the frequency and geographical distribution of particular colloquial variants over time. As an example, consider vowel reduction in unstressed syllables, following which the same sound might be rendered by any vowel letters or many of their combinations: *Taylor*, *Tayler*, *Taylar*, *Taylir*, *Taylour*, *Tayleur*, *Taylaure*, *Taylure*, *Tailear*, *Taileour*, *Tailore*. Analysing this kind of variation can contribute new knowledge about historical relations between spoken and written forms of English dialects.



¹ See the paragraph beginning below, after section 2.5e.

2.3. *Surname variation endemic in unstandardized aspects of English orthography*, such as those seen in the multiple representation of the vowel /i:/ (*Leigh, Lea, Lee*); in the use of the single letter <-x-> rather than multi-letter representations such as <-cks-> (*Dixon, Dickson*); and in the use of single vs. double letters in final position (*Trim, Trimm*).

2.4. *The chronology and geographical limits of surname variation and change* among variants known to be specific to particular dialects, e.g. Southern and South-Western initial [v] for [f] (*Varwell*), Northern Middle English [ɛ:] for Midland and Southern [o:] (*Gait* vs. *Goat*); the West Midlands genitive suffix *-en* vs. general *-s* (*Watten* vs. *Watts*). This would extend and complement the dialectological groundwork by KRISTENSSON (1967–2001).]

2.5. *Surname variation showing irregular phonetic and morphological development*. The loss of transparency and intelligibility that often accompanied hereditary surnaming, combined with the colloquial variation in pronunciation mentioned in section 2.2., has sometimes encouraged the invention of formally new surnames through unhistorical associations. These inventions take various forms:

2.5a. Alteration through analogy (folk etymology, deliberate or otherwise) because of perceived similarity to other names locally or nationally (such as *Didymus*, a Biblically founded (John 11:16; 20:24; 21:2) re-interpretation of the locative surname *Diddams*), *Shirehampton* as a rationalization of *Shrimpton* based falsely on a different place-name (COATES 2015), and *O’Nions*, a spuriously Anglo-Irish spelling and pronunciation of *Onions*).

2.5b. Alteration through analogy because of perceived similarity to words of the common vocabulary (for example *Flood* alongside *Lloyd* as an anglicized form of Welsh *Llwyd*, *McCloud* and *McQueen* for Scottish Gaelic *Mac Leòid* and *Mac Shuibhne*). This also covers patterns of substitution of unstressed elements known from English place-names (e.g. *-burn* for *-bury*, *-borough* for *-brook*) and also found in surnames derived from them, as well as the wilder variety seen in for example *Osborne* (e.g. *Osburn*, *Osbone*, *Osband*, *Osbond*). This matter is especially closely related to the question of reduced vowels dealt with under section 2.2. above.

2.5c. Hypercorrection, as seen in the southern Yorkshire surname *Bramwell*, a re-interpretation of *Bramall* “overcompensating” for such developments as *Millard* from *Millward* with its loss of postconsonantal [w].

2.5d. Known and suspected spelling-pronunciations, such as the re-pronunciation of *Smyth* to rhyme with *scythe*, or *Brokenshire* with its back diphthong [ɔʊ] in the first syllable, which originates as a variant of *Birkinshaw*.



2.5e. Ideally, time should be found to study the anglicization of names arriving from elsewhere (e.g. France, eastern Europe and Arabic-using countries), using census and genealogical evidence, including testimonies where available. The main processes to be studied (cf. BRAMWELL 2013) include maintenance of names without change, re-spelling, translation/calquing, the adoption of alien names as surnames which are not surnames in the donor culture (e.g. *Begum*, *Singh*, *bin X*), and any eventual reversion in the relevant communities to traditional forms and systems.

We believe that no systematic study of these surname phenomena has ever been done. The first priority therefore would be to establish a catalogue of all such recurring non-canonical changes identifiable from established clusters in our database material. The second goal would be to apply the fruits of our analyses to identifying previously overlooked variants of names in the existing database (i.e. those which have remained unexplained). Both of these moves together will allow the production of a richly exemplified checklist of variation sub-types which could assist in genealogical research.

A subsidiary concern of linguistic import would be to establish whether there truly have been any processes which apply, or have applied, differentially to names as opposed to vocabulary words, or exclusively to names, as has been claimed from time to time in the linguistic literature of name theory (e.g. in such papers as CLARK 1991, COLMAN 1995, and sporadically by others). Through extracting recurrent phenomena from massive amounts of surname data, we would be able to establish how far linguistic processes affect names in a different way or degree from lexical words, which are affected by phonological variation and change in ways that are linguistically broadly regular and well understood sociolinguistically.

3. Public involvement in data-collection, and dissemination

There are potentially different “unofficial” processes of surname change taking place even today. It would be essential to use social media to invite the public to submit for scrutiny, and discuss, variation known to them under the following headings:

3.1. Instances of deliberate changes of the form of a surname by some bearers (e.g. the documented *Parish* > *Paris*, *Willington* > *Wellington*), in which we would seek to know how this was approached and received in families and communities in the form of overt commentary, especially if some members of a family accept the change while others do not



3.2. Instances of the unexpected pronunciation of orthographic forms, especially if some members of a family do this and others do not (e.g. *Clowes* /klu:z/)

3.3. Instances of other people’s mispronunciation of a surname, especially if persistent, and whether the bearer has given up the struggle to rectify it (e.g. *Brazil*, originally /'bræzəl/, now often like the country-name)

3.4. More generally, information about the reasons why known individuals changed the spelling or the pronunciation of their surname

3.5. This could lead incidentally to collection of information on practices involved in change of surname-form, for example at marriage or civil partnership, including the deliberate creation of new, blended, or double-barrelled surnames, complementing the already burgeoning literature on name-change and -substitution (e.g. MACEACHERON 2024, and the many works referred to there).

These approaches would be intended to engage people who are active in genealogical research, along with more casual contributors, while also educating them about the importance of linguistics in family history. The BBC’s celebrity family history series *Who do you think you are?* has been broadcast in 20 series over 20 years. It does not routinely foreground surnames, but they are implicit in everything that is discussed. Making explicit reference to surname history could sharpen an already significant public interest. A recent episode failed to explore why the comedian Paul Merton had changed his surname from *Martin*; even a brief discussion of that would have added a dimension to his family history for viewers.²

The project as we have described it should be set up to encourage a virtuous spiral of information. Media exposure, and dissemination through talks to local interest groups, would enable further data streams to be added to the historical one we detailed above.

We are well aware that the proliferation of data streams could be a problem in a number of respects: sheer volume, quality control, and (in the public cases) lack of systematicity, and monitoring safeguards would need to be put in place regarding the adoption of publicly submitted data.

² The name Paul Martin was already that of a theatrical performer, so Merton adopted the name of the London borough where he grew up as a stage-name (BARRATT 2007).



4. Past and future for the database

While the multi-stream enterprise we have just described forms the core of any future project, we are well aware that our knowledge base is likely to increase (just as during FaNUK 2) as more resources become readily available and as our understanding of the patterns being investigated improves. The proposed research should therefore include the leeway to use any new material to improve explanations in the existing database, which is already the sole comprehensive authoritative national resource. Doing this would prepare in the longer run for a further edition of ODFaNBI. Oxford University Press have expressed in-principle interest in publishing a second edition, and every new finding would be a potential contribution to it.

5. Impact

In addition to the clear academic benefits spelt out above, such a future project would have a societal impact. Findings about recurrent types of change would be of interest to genealogists and family historians who would be able to use them in the process of discovering family links where surname transmission has become obscured by linguistic change. Consideration of dialect variation could inform their analyses of familial patterns of migration. Both these strands would enable them to identify a greater number of potential variant surname forms related to the family name(s) they are studying. However, our relationship with family historians is cyclical, since through the online and personal-contact methods spelt out above, they would also be in a position to contribute significant amounts of data with the potential to refine the change typology itself. Their role spelt out above would therefore be a key element of the research process, involved and engaged over the course of the entire project.

6. Even further beyond the project outlined: the potential for further development

After putting knowledge of the facts of variation in surnames, and some reasons for it, on a sounder evidential footing, we see the potential, and the desirability, of building on it in further work in such ways as the following three:

6.1. The relation of surname variation to migration

Many surnames appear in a range of variant forms identified and verified during FaNUK 1 and 2, the types of relationship among which are to be determined in the proposed project. Most of these variants emerge locally in or close to the area of origin, whilst other variants arise when names appear in new areas (e.g. REDMONDS, KING and HEY 2011: 109). This applies in the cases both of migration within the UK and of immigration. Such variation can



be analysed from the perspective of historical sociolinguistics. Surnames are more unstable in form than place-names. Not only do individual people move around, but so also may the *epicentres* of surnames (defined as their areas of greatest geographical concentration). On the basis of the analyses performed as set out above, we envisage being able to assess the respective contributions to surname variation and change of (1) internal variation, i.e. dialectal and sociolectal variety and systematic (internal) language change, and (2) language or dialect contact. We would then be free to analyse systematically a large amount of the more idiosyncratic variation which we already know cannot be attributed to these primary linguistic forces. That residual variation would often be ascribable to social factors other than mere spoken contacts.

6.2. The relation of surname movement and variation to known patterns of economic activity

Studying surname epicentre movement is a proxy for the study of the movement of sets of persons whose biographies are unknown. It is customary to relate surnames and movements of people in a bottom-up way, i.e. to justify connecting individual names that appear in historically and linguistically unexpected areas by appealing *ad hoc* to known economic drivers: e.g. to account for the German names of tin miners identified in Cumberland in the 16th century (*Senogles* from *Zinnagel*), or appealing to the regional economic drawing power of large cities such as Glasgow, Manchester, Birmingham and Leeds since the Industrial Revolution. So far as we know, this connection has never been attempted top-down, i.e. starting with known economic drivers such as (1) the contraction and desertion of medieval villages after the Black Death; (2) the pre-modern seasonal maritime fishing industry; and (3) the linking of cities in the earliest days of railway expansion (say up till the 1861 census). Findings of this type would be capable of providing suggestive information for individual family histories.

Evidence of surname movements would also make a significant contribution to the mapping of what DAVID HEY (1992) called *surname neighbourhoods* and their relationship to historical socio-economic regions. Building on the work of historians such as those cited by MCCLURE (1979), e.g. CARUS-WILSON (1965), further investigation of links between surnames, socio-economic history, and mobility has the potential to be of considerable interdisciplinary value.

6.3. Two statistical issues in anthroponomastics

Data already collected during FaNUK 1 and 2 has the potential to inform a statistical study of the relation between rarity of a surname and its tendency to acquire a greater number of variant forms, focusing on all names in the database with (say) eight or more demonstrable variants. This would contribute to



evaluating the apparently competing notions that rare names tend to give rise to even rarer names, and that rare names tend to be subject to analogical changes (as in the main proposal above) which might bring them closer to other names. This would provide a balancing perspective to such pioneering studies as that of STURGES and HAGGETT (1987), which are based on mathematical models of inheritance rather than on figures deriving from historical surname data.

7. Conclusion

We have set out what we believe is a viable path towards future study of surnames in the UK, and identified some research questions which we think are of interest and of both academic and societal value. At the same time, the proposed work will put to further use a great deal of material which has been gathered and analysed thanks to public funding.³ We are confident that a programme based on these ideas will be a viable and suitable candidate for a further tranche of UK public funding.

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³ AHRC grant numbers AH/H018921/1 and AH/L007401/1.

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Abstract

The first two phases of the “Family Names of the United Kingdom” [FaNUK] project, funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council, set out to explain the origin of all surnames found in Britain and Ireland that had more than 20 bearers in 1881 and/or more than 100 in 2011. The fruits of the first funded phase (2010–2014) were published as *The Oxford Dictionary of Family Names in Britain and Ireland* (OUP, 2016). Many surnames had never been explained at all before FaNUK, and given the wealth of new or corrected explanations achieved by the project, and the huge volume of collected and/or e-accessible material now available, deeper analysis is both possible and timely.

The aim of the possible further project that we describe here will be to address the theme of *variation in the form of surnames*. This situates the project primarily within the fields of English historical sociolinguistics and socio-onomastics, while relevant to history and demography. Its scope will be unified by the idea of analysing *non-canonical changes in English*, specifically the following five types: variation as an unstandardized consequence of mechanical or acoustic phonetic processes typical of informal speech (such as unstressed vowel reduction); variation of a particular under-studied phono-orthographic type involving vowel length (as in *Sim* vs. *Sime*); variation endemic in unstandardized aspects of English orthography (as in *Lee* vs. *Leigh*); variation due to analogy with other names or name elements locally or nationally, and with words of the common vocabulary; and any aspects of hypercorrection and spelling-pronunciation not implicitly covered in the above. This will lead naturally to devoting attention to the phonological and orthographical techniques employed in anglicizing names arriving from abroad, thereby linking the present paper to the conference sub-theme of identity and naming.

Keywords: family names, surnames, United Kingdom, future project

