

In: E.M. Näsäri (Ed), Proceedings of the XVIIIth  
International Congress of Onomastics,  
Helsinki 13-18 August 1990. Helsinki, 1990, Vol. 2,

THE GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF TOPONYMICAL  
ELEMENTS IN THE DUTCH-SPEAKING PART OF BELGIUM,  
BASED ON THE CORPUS "MOLEMANS- THIRY" 147-154.

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## 0. Introduction

To adequately describe systems of place names from a geographical point of view it is indispensable to have an extensive and reliable collection of toponymic data. For Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, we have the "Corpus Molemans-Thiry" (CMT), consisting mainly of field names, which was compiled with data from about 250 Flemish municipalities.

I will first describe the purpose of this data-collection and the parameters according to which it was set up, and then I will illustrate with some samples how it can be applied onomastically. The CMT is particularly valuable for three disciplines, viz. the geography of names, historical grammar and dialectology, and history. As the title indicates, the main focus of this paper is on the geographical aspect.

## 1. The corpus "Molemans-Thiry" (CMT)

Ever since 1925, the year in which the first toponymical thesis was finished at what is now called "The Institute of Onomastics and Dialectology" of The University of Leuven (Belgium), more than 200 students have chosen toponymy as the subject of their thesis. As part of this work they collected in the archives and, to a lesser extent, also in the language of the local people, the proper names of their place or region of birth. Not only names of municipalities, hamlets and districts (so-called major names), but also names of fields and pastures, woods, rivers and lakes, streets and houses (minor names) were gathered and etymologically explained. In this way, in the course of 60 years, a collection of more than half a million different place names of over 250 Flemish municipalities, ranging from 1200 until now, has been built up.

As these unpublished data, scattered over many separate sites in 4 Belgian universities, proved inaccessible to research in this form, they were transmitted to

computer by J. Molemans and A. Thiry in the seventies (1). The largest part of the Corpus Molemans-Thiry is taken up with the Leuven theses, but the theses made in Ghent, Brussels and Liège were also incorporated. Although the initial aim of the project was to make an overall index on the place names collected so far, the present CMT, due to its structure, proves to be valuable for research in several disciplines.

The corpus is constructed as follows: each place name is described by means of an alphanumerical code, divided into seven substrings, each of which represents one aspect of the identifying information. This string of symbols is preceded by a modernised entry (E) and the original attestation (A). For instance,

KOUTER	DE-COUTERE	I 0215	0365	1522	09	99	0	1
	DEN-CAUTER	I 0215	0365	1665	09	99	0	1
(E)	(A)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)

The positions (1) to (7) indicate:

- (1) the place where the toponym is found
- (2) the number of the thesis in the institute in question
- (3) the date of attestation
- (4) the "toponymical reality" e.g. 09 = arable land, 10 = grass-land, 11 = forest, 12 = waste land, 03 = a dwelling, 05 = a way, and so on.
- (5) whether or not the place name has been explained
- (6) whether or not the local pronunciation of the name has been phonetically transcribed
- (7) whether or not all the variants are selected. Except for the date the variants (A) have the same code as their entry.

In its final version the CMT consists of three independent parts: an alphabetically ordered register of the modernised entries, an inverted index on those entries, and thirdly an alphabetical concordance on the constituent elements of the place names. All three lists have proved their usefulness for linguistic purposes.

## 2. Applications

**2.1.** First and foremost, the CMT is of special interest for the geography of names. In spite of the shortcomings of the material, which derive from the uneven quality of the monographs, the present Corpus can be made into an atlas of geographical names, in which both phonological and morphological variants are described. The idea of such an atlas is not new; similar research in Germany recently resulted in two in many respects innovative onomastic atlases, viz. the "Hessischer

Flurnamenatlas" edited by H. Ränge (1987), and the "Westfälisch-Lippischer Flurnamenatlas" by G. Müller, of which a pilot article was published in 1984.

To illustrate how the CMT material can serve as the basis for an onomastic atlas, I have chosen two frequently attested place names that both originally indicated "agricultural land", viz. *akker* and *kouter*. In order to analyse the geographical distribution of these elements, there should not, of course, be any gaps on the map. As this preliminary condition is not fulfilled for the westernmost province of Belgium, West-Flanders, I have completed the material for this region with the data from the corpus by De Flou (2).

Map 1 represents the attestations of *akker* and *kouter*. This map indicates both the variables and the frequencies. *Akker* is symbolised by a horizontal line, *kouter* by a vertical one. The length of the lines indicates the frequency of occurrence.

The general picture offered by the map shows a north-south opposition rather than an east-west contrast. As in the middle of Belgium two culturally and linguistically different communities touch one another, this kind of contrast usually indicates that the observation has to be related to the linguistic frontier that divides Belgium into a Germanic and a Romance part. *Akker* is omnipresent in the Flemish toponymy, but clearly occurs to a considerably higher degree in the northern part of Flanders than in the region that borders the French-speaking area. The highest concentration of *kouter* on the other hand is found in the south of the province of East-Flanders. Moreover *kouter* appears in a small strip along the language frontier. An obvious explanation for this not surprising distribution is provided by the etymology of both words: *akker* is a native Germanic word, whereas *kouter* is derived from Latin *cultura* and belongs to the Romance group. The exact date of borrowing from Romance is a point at issue, but the phonetic structure of *kouter* makes clear that this happened in an early stage, as the present word completely fits into the Dutch sound system.

Although the north-west contrast predominates the picture of the map, another opposition, indeed less pronounced, is discernable from the data, viz. the contrast between the eastern and the western part of Flanders; the natural border here is the river Scheldt. This river is considered to be an important dialect-border as well: the dialectal differences between the Flemish (the provinces of West- and East-Flanders) and the Brabant dialects (the provinces of Brabant and Antwerp) for the most part coincide with its course. The fifth province of Flanders, Limburg, linguistically bears more resemblance to the neighbouring German area.

In the eastern part of Flanders the *akker*-names account for the greater part of the toponymic data. Especially in the north of Antwerp and Limburg the word is firmly established, which proves the lexeme *akker* to have been a productive term to denote aral land. Place names containing *akker* occur to the west of the Scheldt as well, even in almost every community, but they share their territory with the more frequent *kouter*-names. *Kouter* is extensively employed in South-East-Flanders and to a lesser extent also in West-Flanders. The map suggests that *akker* formerly enjoyed a wider distribution that completely covered Flanders. However since the 12th century, presumably the period in which in the adjacent areas along the language frontier a new word for aral land was borrowed from Romance, *kouter* gradually penetrated northwards. Particularly the south of East-Flanders was strongly infiltrated by *kouter*, resulting in a transitional area where the *akker*-names to a large extent were stamped out.

From history we know that the introduction of *kouter* went hand in hand with a change in the structure of the landscape. The land that had been brought into cultivation since the advent of the Germans and mostly had been called *akker*, was expanded and reorganised in the Middle Ages in a second period of reclamations. The existing *akkers* were joined to open, homogenous entities that fitted into the changing domanical system of that period and renamed *kouter*. These changes did not take place in the east and the north of Flanders which favoured the previous denomination, *akker*.

The map on which the simple versus the compound attestations of *akker* resp. *kouter* have been pointed out, confirms this former hypothesis: the compound names predominate in the kernel area of *akker* and *kouter* ; the simplex occurs more outside of it.

In the above, I have somewhat deliberately talked of "geography of names", which is rather similar to "word geography" but nevertheless has to be distinguished from it, as there is not a one-to-one correspondence between the occurrence of the appellative noun and the toponym: some words that were used to indicate pieces of land belonged already for a long time to the lexicon of generic names, before they fossilized into place names. On the other hand, the presence of certain elements in place names does not necessarily imply that the underlying noun is still used in appellative speech. To clarify the complex relation between the noun and the name, the above study should be supplemented with appellative data.

2.2. Secondly, some issues of historical grammar and dialectology can be answered with the aid of the CMT. The interaction between onomastics and historical linguistics appears to be fruitful for instance for the investigation of phonetic changes that took place in the generic lexicon but are reflected in the same way in the proprial set of words, at least as long as the latter are transparent.

A concrete example from the Corpus is the distribution of the ending of the diminutive: two endings compete in this respect, viz. *-ke*, which is still the dialectal form, and *-je*, the standardform, e.g. *straatke* versus *straatje* (little street). In the course of the 18th century *-ke* was palatalized to *-je*. This process went through several transitional stages. Owing to the great number of attestations in the CMT, with their graphological variants, which are situated differently in time and in space, the progress of this phenomenon can be accurately mapped out as well.

2.3. Besides other objectives of which the geography of names is the most intrinsically onomastic one, toponymy, thirdly, can, as an auxiliary science, be put at the service of history. The CMT can be used to draw conclusions with respect to for instance the history of settlement (all the names of hamlets) or the history of the landscape. The fourth code of the above mentioned string, the "toponymical reality" linked to the date of attestation, is important here.

As a sample I pointed out all the names that contain *rode* on map 2. *Rode* is a Dutch term for "land that is made suitable for cultivation by grubbing up the forest". The word itself belongs to history: it is not known in everyday speech anymore. To avoid confusion with *rood*, the name of the colour, a homonym that often occurs in names of inns for instance, I only took the numbers 11 (forest) on the fourth position of the string into consideration.

The history of disforestation can be deduced from the picture offered by the map. The *rode*-names are most frequent in a coherent area in the east of Flemish-Brabant. *Rode* is, not accidentally, still reflected in about ten names of municipalities in this region that are, not accidentally, compounds with *rode*. The layer of *rode*-toponyms becomes thinner to the east and to the north: only in the west of East-Flanders and in a circle around Antwerp can there be question of a more than incidental use of *rode*. This geographical distribution roughly corresponds to the gradual clearing of the once very extended forest of which there are still remainders in the middle of Belgium. The edges of this forest were first exploited, the more central parts later had their turn. Many of the *rode*-names in the CMT climb up to

the 14th and 15th century, which is, compared to the mean date of attestation of the material, very early. A more detailed study of the historical dimension, by means of intersections per century for instance, would allow us to make a precise sketch of this aspect of the history of exploitation.

#### Notes

- (1) A. THIRY reported on the progress of the project in *Naamkunde* 6 (1974), 200-202; 10 (1978), 396-397; 11 (1979), 323-324; 14 (1982), 129-131.
- (2) K. DE FLOU, *Woordenboek der Toponymie van Westelijk Vlaanderen, Vlaamsch Artesië, het Land van den Hoek, de graafschappen Guines en Boulogne, en een gedeelte van het graafschap Ponthieu*. *Gent*, 1914, 18 delen.

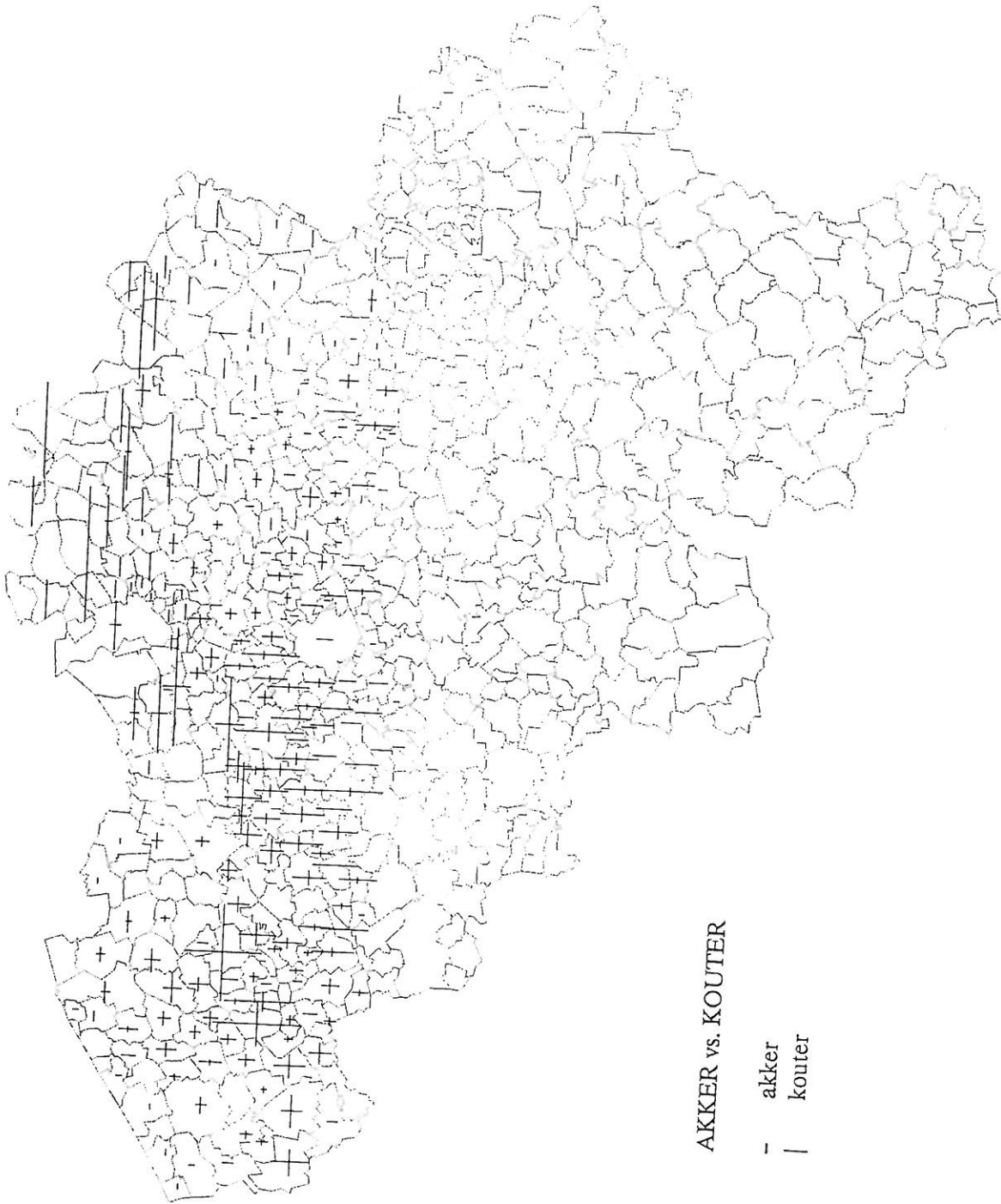
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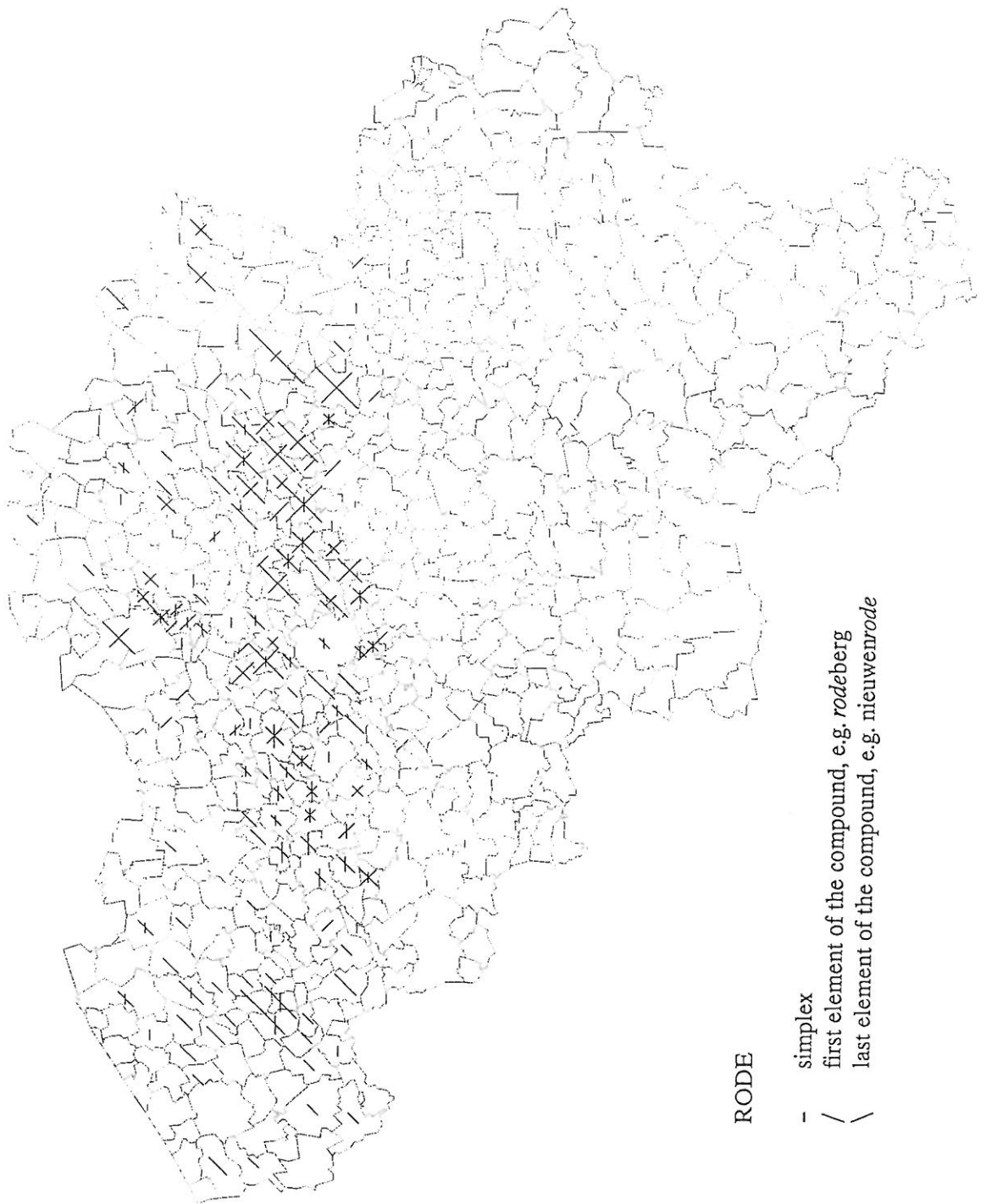
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RODE

- simplex
- / first element of the compound, e.g. *rodeberg*
- \ last element of the compound, e.g. *nieuwenrode*