

REVIEW

Sunnyside. A Sociolinguistic History of British House Names. By Laura Wright. Cambridge University Press, 2020. Pp. xviii, 281.

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Laura Wright's *Sunnyside: A Sociolinguistic History of British House Names* offers a comprehensive, multi-faceted study of house names in Britain (with some references to the USA and Scandinavia), paying special attention to the title name *Sunnyside* and its social history. The book tackles the topic of house naming which, as the author herself points out (1), has been long neglected by linguists, so it is an innovative project. Nonetheless, it cannot be easily placed within one specific area of research. On the one hand, it pertains to onomastics, more specifically toponymy, and by consequence to lexicology. On the other hand, as announced in the subtitle, it represents a historical sociolinguistic study (1, 7), but certainly not a typical one (see below).

As regards the structure of the monograph, after the preliminaries comes the "Introduction", followed by five chapters, three appendixes, a gazetteer, the bibliography, and the index. In the "Introduction" (1–11), the author describes the main purposes of her book, formulating four "sociolinguistic claims" (4–6). In the first claim, Wright postulates the rise of a "new class of knighthood" in the fourteenth century. The new class "adopted personal (as opposed to dynastic) heraldic devices of the sort that had formerly been restricted to the nobility" and "became apparent in heraldic house names signifying commercial enterprise" (4). This assertion is elaborated in Chapter 1 (12–44), entitled "The earliest London house names", where the author describes her findings regarding the changing house naming patterns before the nineteenth century. Because in the Middle Ages people often lived where they worked, she discusses the names of both commercial and non-commercial buildings. The prevailing formula before 1400 included the householder's name followed by the type of house, for example, *haw*, *bury* or *seld*. The other common patterns from that period contain a component referring to the house appearance or house usage, apart from the type of house. The fourteenth and

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fifteenth centuries witnessed an important change in house naming, consisting in the remarkable increase in the use of the hitherto rare pattern involving heraldic names employed from then on especially for commercial premises. All the house naming formulas are generously illustrated with quotations from primary sources, with explanations both in the main text and in footnotes as well as with extensive lists of examples, five tables and three appendixes. The first chapter can be considered a compact, guided tour through centuries of house naming in England, with the focus on London, from the earliest record available up to the early nineteenth century.

In the second sociolinguistic claim made in the “Introduction”, the author declares that “the coming into being of the new suburbs resulted in linguistic change in the residential street frontage, visible on house signs”, pointing to the resemblance between this development and the way in which “new technology in recent decades has resulted in linguistic change in the virtual environment, with a proliferation of new meanings, acronyms and blends” (6). Although it is not explicitly indicated by Wright, this claim is discussed in Chapter 2, “Victorian Villas” (45–63). She points out that residential habits changed significantly in the nineteenth century, especially following the introduction of railways in the 1840s, with newly wealthy families moving to the suburbs, which often involved a division between commercial and private (residential) premises, with the former remaining downtown. In this chapter, the author focuses on the names in selected roads leading out of London to its peripheries, specifically the Wandsworth and Finchley Roads, in the mid- and late nineteenth century, found in Post Office directories, selected newspapers and other archives. On the basis of her findings, she offers a classification of house names into seven new categories, comprising commemorative (e.g., *Ballard's Lodge*), transferred place-names (e.g., *Florence Villa*), nostalgically rural (e.g., *Oak Lodge*), upwardly-mobile (e.g., *Warren Lodge*), latest fad (e.g., *The Ferns*), DIY pick and mix (e.g., *Rosemont*) as well as the jocular (e.g., *Wee Nest*), with the last two emerging at the end of the nineteenth century (the examples taken from pages 50 and 54).

In Chapter 3, “London’s first Sunnysiders” (64–92), Wright explores the nineteenth-century use of the house name provided in the title of her book, with special attention devoted to identifying the profile of a typical owner of a house named *Sunnyside*. As the author admits in the “Introduction” (11), she initially misconceived this word as “a post-war, semi-detached or terraced house name” used by lower social classes, whereas her later in-depth investigation revealed that *Sunnyside* had a long, rich and fascinating history all of its own. In the nineteenth century, this house name was first recorded in the 1860s, and its popularity increased steadily over time. Wright discovered that the early adopters of *Sunnyside* were wealthy, industrious, non-gentry, open-minded “socially-embedded businessmen” (82), highly influential in their fields, who

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inhabited stately detached houses in the outer suburbs of London. Their concise biographies constitute the core of the third chapter and the biographical information is supported by a detailed, eight-page-long list of archival sources.

The profiles (and stories) of the earliest “Sunnysiders” continue to be in focus in Chapter 4, “Religion, fame and Sunnyside” (93–121), but this time with emphasis laid on their religious views and connections as well as some aspects of the socio-cultural context. Having realised that most early owners of *Sunnyside* houses in England and Scotland dissented from the state religion, Wright concludes that there is a correlation between Nonconformism and the name *Sunnyside*. She explains that as “financially-successful commoners” (93) they could not reach positions of authority (which would correspond to their high economic status) in the Church of England or the Established Church of Scotland, because these institutions honoured the feudal rank system, with nobility as the only eligible religious community elders and leaders. In this chapter, attention is also drawn to religious connotations of the name *Sunnyside* with the figurative light of the Christian faith as well as with the promise of “heavenly blessings” (94). The author has found that apart from private houses, also numerous churches bear the name, but mainly in the New World. Apparently, the runners of the first such churches were early-eighteenth-century Quakers through whose extensive social networks the name was soon taken to North America and other continents. By the 1850s, it had started to occur in a variety of contexts, for instance, referring to a racehorse, a ship, and a song-title. Also successful nineteenth-century novelists used the word *Sunnyside* in their novels and/or lived in houses of this name. Among them was Washington Irving, whose splendid *Sunnyside* house in New York state – inspired by Sir Walter Scott’s house with regard to its looks and by a traditional sixteenth-century Sunnyside Farm close to his estates, in Roxburghshire as for the name – became a popular tourist attraction and, presumably, contributed to the popularity of the name itself both in Britain and in the USA. *Sunnyside* began to connote not only Christian benevolence, but also modernity and extraordinary prosperity.

Although, again, it is not announced by the author, one can infer that Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, in tandem, develop the third sociolinguistic claim postulated in the “Introduction”, “that the house name Sunnyside had a life as a code-word signaling firstly the Quaker, and then more generally the counter-establishment values of the house owner” (7), though the last part of the chapter (about famous “Sunnysiders”) shows the permeation of the name into the mainstream culture which is not covered by this claim. The popularity of *Sunnyside* is mentioned at the beginning of the fourth and last sociolinguistic claim which reads “that this common modern house name had an anterior life as part of a prepositional phrase in Middle English, Older Scots and (as a translation) in Scottish Gaelic, with manuscript evidence dating to c. 1200, long preceding its use as a house

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name” (8). The remaining part of the claim is verified in Chapter 5, “Sunnyside and the north” (122–145), devoted to tracing the motivation for the appearance of *Sunnyside* in the British countryside. This part of the study was prompted by Washington Irving’s decision to name his house *Sunnyside* after the property in Roxburghshire. On the basis of further research, Wright identified the main areas where historic *Sunnysides* occurred, including mainly north-eastern Scotland, the Central Lowlands and north-eastern England. The name *Sunnyside* turned out to have originated in a traditional (legal) Nordic land division procedure, also known as *solskifte* (‘sun-shift’) or “sun/shadow partition” (127), making up part of the open field system, used before the privatisation of land. The system involved dividing and parting the sunny and shadow sides “as a means of identifying cultivatable strips” (145). Historic instances of *Sunnyside* often appear in a prepositional phrase following the pattern “Sunnyside of X”, where “X” stands for a specific place-name, e.g. “Sunnyside of Badentoy” (137). The author found also a related prepositional pattern, “Greens of X”, e.g. “Greens of Cook” (139), where today’s *Greens* does not have to be related to English *green*, but it quite likely may have developed from the Scottish Gaelic *grian* ‘sun, sunlight’ or *grianan* ‘sunny spot; green; sunny eminence; exposure’ (among other meanings), and, ultimately, Old Norse *grein* ‘a river-fork, bifurcation of valleys’ (4, 139–140). The higher frequency of the names “Sunnyside of X” and “Greens of X” in Scotland (see the maps in the fifth chapter, presenting their geographical distribution), compared to England, is explained by the longer use of the relevant procedure in the former and the early abandonment of the open field system in the latter (in the thirteenth century).

The previous chapters apparently follow the order of the author’s line of reasoning and the corresponding consecutive stages in the investigation, starting from an introduction to the early history of house names in London, proposing useful typologies of house names, and then unveiling the story of *Sunnyside* in the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries. Chapter 6 (146–149), in turn, in accordance with its title, “Sunnyside timeline”, offers a chronologically arranged overview of the ups and downs of *Sunnyside* use from its (presumably) pre-medieval origins up to the twentieth century when the name started to be associated with the “cheapest rural housing” (148). In the last paragraphs, Laura Wright concisely synthesises her study as one that started “from one Victorian suburban house name in Ealing Green” which caught her interest, but led “to a sunray of house names fanning out across northern latitudes” (149) and concludes that the choices of house names among speakers in different periods have surprisingly much in common, showing a predilection for “transferred place-names, their commemorations, their nostalgia for the countryside, and their pick & mix faux-traditional innovations” (149).

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As regards the unquestionable strengths of the monograph, it must be emphasised that the statements concerning the history of *Sunnyside*, the related names and their users, are comprehensively supported with references to and extensive quotations from a remarkable variety of archival sources whose details are provided both inside the chapters (often in the form of tables) and in the following appendixes and the gazetteer. The three appendixes and the geographical index with maps, entitled “Sunnyside gazetteer”, cover jointly one hundred pages (out of 281). The archival information can be of much use to scholars intending to conduct further research on the people and names discussed in the book. However, the abundance of bibliographical data could be confusing for an average reader. To prevent the readers from getting lost in the maze of details, Wright guides them through the book with a rather elaborate signposting system comprising a summary at the end of each chapter (Chapters 1–5), a timeline Chapter 6, and repetitions, especially at the beginnings of chapters, of important points considered in the previous sections. It becomes clear early in the study that the author is an experienced expert in investigating linguistically mixed-language business, administrative, and other medieval documents and her monograph *Sunnyside* clearly draws upon this long-standing research experience (especially in Chapter 1). Despite the profusion of the information included in it, the monograph does not cause the readers’ fatigue, but rather produces the effect of pleasurable eclecticism and interest in what will come next thanks to its adroitly juggling different genres, intertwining quotations, tables, and lists of examples with maps, photographs, biographical anecdotes, etymologies, and scholarly comments.

Nonetheless, some academic readers may find certain aspects of the book controversial. A potential problem is the author’s treatment of theoretical issues, which is not typical of a sociolinguistic study. The comprehensiveness of references to the archival sources discussed in the previous sections of this review contrasts with the scantiness of theoretical elaboration and references to sociolinguistic studies. Although Wright claims that she has “used the methods of social network theory, and the concept of the community of practice, to discover who talked to whom, and in what kind of relationship and social activity” (7), her use of these methods in the monograph remains largely implicit, as she refers to relevant sociolinguistic research (Milroy 1980, Eckert & Wenger 2005) only in one short footnote in the “Introduction” (7), and does not elaborate on the theoretical and methodological aspects of these concepts, that is, how she understands them and what criteria she considers necessary to identify them. The term *community of practice* is mentioned one more time in the book, when referring to “farmers living in a specific set of geographical circumstances dividing up their land” (9). The concept of *social network*, in turn, appears in a few places, regarding networks of (travelling) Quakers (7, 147), Sandemanians (68),

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Sunnysiders' overlapping networks (71–72, 82–83) as well as network analysis (110–111). Only in this last case are any criteria mentioned, including *centrality*, *betweenness*, and *degree*, but this is done within the forensic rather than usual sociolinguistic context. Elsewhere, the terms *innovator* (8) and *early adopter* (9, 83) are mentioned but, again, without explanation of their role in the social network analysis. Besides, the author refers to naming as a “human speech act” (2) and “performing declarative speech-acts” (5), using a term related to pragmatics, but its exact meaning is not clearly specified. Also, narration in the book does not explicitly evolve around the sociolinguistic claims formulated in the “Introduction” and the assessment of which claim is developed in which chapter is left to the reader. It is neither a typical macrosociolinguistic study or a regular micro-sociolinguistic one, but it incorporates some features of both these perspectives; for example, the discussion on the general impact of introducing the railways in the 1840s in England on people's patterns of (also linguistic) behaviour is accompanied with specific examples of individuals' house name usage. In view of the richness of the resources consulted and the combination of approaches taken, the author seems to have put into practice the principle of *informational maximalism* (Janda & Joseph 2003: 37) and the concept of *layered simultaneity* (Nevalainen 2015) although, regrettably, these terms are not even mentioned in the book.

Concerning technical matters, the preliminaries, surprisingly, do not include a list of tables though a list of illustrations is provided. There is a glossary explaining unusual words, but it comprises only nine entries which, considering the number of technical terms used in the book (see, for instance, the section on architectural features of Sir Walter Scott's Abbotsford House, 115), several more items could be added to it. Conversely, the final Index involves some useful extra features, for instance, marking in bold the page numbers referring to tables and in italics those containing figures.

Notwithstanding the potential weaknesses concerning the theoretical layer as well as some minor imperfections, Laura Wright's *Sunnyside* is definitely an exceptional book, impressively detailed and delightfully heterogeneous, employing a *pick-and-mix* narration strategy (using the term which the author introduced in her house naming typology). It fills in a niche in the place-name research and simultaneously offers literary entertainment. As such, it is likely to be highly appreciated not only by academics (seasoned and inexperienced alike) conducting their studies in the areas of onomastics, word-formation, social history, and historical sociolinguistics, but also by non-academic readers interested in house names, biographies, and the development of words over time.

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