

Sam Mersch, Studies in Luxembourgish Micro-Toponymy and Linguistic History. Phonology, Morphology, Syntax and Lexical Studies. Regensburger Studien zur Namenforschung Bd. 13. Regensburg: edition vulpes 2023. 545 S. – ISBN 978–3–939112–36–5, Preis: EUR 52,00.

Jeffrey Pheiff

The monograph at the center of this review is the printed and abbreviated version of a dissertation that its author, Sam Mersch, submitted and defended at the University of Luxemburg in 2021. The aim of the monograph is “to analyse minor place names [...] of Luxembourg regarding their linguistic traits and in relevance to their potential as a source for studying the linguistic prehistory of the Luxembourgish language. The idea is to trace back linguistic developments, starting from the modern era, and using toponomastic data, which can often bear archaic and petrified forms” (pg. 4–5). Hence, the state borders of the Grand Duchy of Luxemburg act as a territorial delimitation for what is supposed to be an investigation into the linguistic history of Luxembourgish. Despite their limitations in describing structural levels above the phonological one or in the kinds of semantics domains that the lexical fields that make them up are based on (pg. 20–21), place names are particularly fascinating linguistic sources since place names can serve “as sources of minute linguistic stages, showing transitions in a languages [sic!] history” (pg. 20). The monograph is composed of thirteen chapters which can be roughly divided into a theoretical and methodological part (Chapters 1–5) and an empirical part (Chapters 6–12) before Chapter 13 (“Summary and Perspectives”) rounds off the thesis. The author complements the monograph with additional resources such as the code for a Python-based toolset *Topolux* on his own GitHub. Broad in its thematic scope, as its subtitle suggests, the monograph investigates graphematic, phonological, morphological, syntactic, and lexical aspects of Luxembourgish place names, and could thus be viewed, in essence, as consisting of different sub-studies that more or less loosely relate to one another. In the author’s words:

[A]ll linguistic aspects of Luxembourgish place names are surveyed at least briefly to show the potential their study can bring [...] Hence, this study not only researches the linguistic past of the Luxembourgish language [sic!] but also gives a broad survey of Luxembourgish toponyms as a source for language, culture and history. In many ways it should work as an open door showing the potential of toponomastic analyses in Luxembourg and offering the first tools to spawn subsequent research. (pg. 5)

Chapter 1 “Introduction” introduces the aims and structure of the monograph, provides some theoretical background on names, and gives a cursory overview of studies on synchronic and diachronic aspects of Luxemburgish (pg. 22–23), onomastics in general (pg. 23–24), and specifically Luxemburgish onomastics (24–27). The main idea of the investigation is, as laid out above, “to trace back linguistic developments, starting from the modern era, and using toponomastic data, which can often bear archaic and petrified forms” (pg. 5). Chapter 2 “Description of Sources” distinguishes between two types of sources: those data that were digital or were able to be digitized and subsequently integrated into the general corpus, and thus available for quantitative analysis versus those that could not be integrated into the corpus (pg. 28). This chapter discusses criteria for the inclusion of a dataset into the corpus as well as some general aspects of the datasets themselves and some other associated issues with the text tradition (*Überlieferung*) of the sources. For example, for inclusion into the general corpus, a data set should both ensure a “wide enough areal coverage” as well as a “statistically relevant qualitative output with regards to quantitative aspects” (pg. 29). Ultimately, the corpus is made up of different data sets taken, for example, from the *Institut Grand-Ducal, Section de Linguistique, d’Ethnologie et d’Onomastique* and the *Diözesanarchiv Luxemburg*, among other institutions and sources (pg. 33–56). Admittedly, this section (2.3) is somewhat difficult to follow since it often makes reference to specific name forms or to specific columns in the original data set without providing a facsimile or some other kind of reproduction to better understand some of the issues at hand (e.g. the discussion on the collection of the *Institut Grand-Ducal* on pg. 34–37). Similarly, a reproduction of the handwriting, in particular as regards the dataset from the *Diözesanarchiv Luxemburg*, would have facilitated illustrating some of the philological issues that the author faced in assembling his corpus (pg. 37–38).

Chapter 3 bears the title “Space and Place” and gives background information on the two geological regions of Luxemburg (*Oesling* and *Gutland*), settlement patterns including the abandonment of villages and population increases, the development of the modern political borders of Luxemburg as well as on language borders. In this latter section, the author ultimately localizes Luxemburgish, from a historical perspective, within the context of the Germanic dialect continuum based on some of its features resulting from the second consonant shift. Nonetheless, the section feels somewhat incomplete and contains some unfortunate factual and terminological errors: Here one is left to wonder as to how Western Moselle Franconian is different from Moselle Franconian? Moreover, “Eastern Franconian” does not belong to the “Middle German band”, but rather to Upper

German (Schmidt 2017: 105) and ‘Central German’ would be the more appropriate English term for German *Mitteldeutsch* (pg. 69). Moreover, with regard to the toponomastic investigation, I feel as though the book could have benefited from a more grounded discussion of the concrete features of certain dialect regions of Luxemburg, despite the “partly evaporating dialects” (pg. 69). Chapter 3 closes with a section entitled “Space Perception”, which offers a glimpse at place and space from a cognitive-theoretical perspective. The section is noteworthy as it makes an effort to tie the onomastic investigation to sociological conceptions of space, offering explanations for the endurance of place names (pg. 71–72). Furthermore, it attempts an explanation as to how the perception of space – with reference to four spheres of spatial knowledge – shapes naming practices (pg. 75–79). As a whole, despite the focus on space, it was unexpected for me as a reader that the author does not provide a single map in this chapter, which makes some of the discussion somewhat difficult to follow, especially if one lacks familiarity with many of the place names or the landscape more generally (e.g. pg. 70–71). On a related note, and with regard to the whole monograph, I was indeed struck by the dearth of visual representations in the form of maps in the monograph, with the exception of Figures 12.9–12.12 in Chapter 12, despite the inclusion of geographic coordinates in the dataset (cf. Section 2.3).

In Chapter 4 “Topolux – Developing a Toponymic Tool Set”, the author first, in Section 4.1, delves into the reasons for the choice of the programming language Python, which, in general, has become a popular programming language in the scientific community because of its versatility (pg. 82–83). Furthermore, the author offers some basic remarks on Python-related terminology including *strings*, *lists*, and *dictionaries* (pg. 83–85). Section 4.2 offers an overview of the workflow and functions of *Topolux*, a toolset that the author developed for the purposes of this investigation and that he also made available to the public via a GitHub repository. I will refrain from commenting on the toolset, however, given my own much more limited technical expertise, but which, I believe, will certainly be an invaluable tool for computer linguists and onomastic projects in the future. Chapter 5 “The Luxembourgish Phoneme Inventory”, as the title suggests, offers a general overview of the Luxembourgish phoneme inventory, which is based on Gilles & Trouvain (2013) in large part. The relevance of this chapter, however, eludes me since the author does not embed the chapter into the context of the monograph as a whole. Sure, the subsequent analysis of what the author dubs “graphematic” and other phonological phenomena does seem to permit it, but then why at the exclusion of a brief grammatical sketch given that morphological and syntactic phenomena are similarly later dealt with? Moreover, the author con-

sistently makes use of the term “phoneme”, but the term “sound” or “phone” would appear to me to have been more appropriate for the context. In addition, the author appears to be somewhat inconsistent in the use of terminology, which made this section at times difficult to parse: For example, it is claimed that “Luxemburgish has many fricative allophones [...] but only the sibilant phonemes /s/ and /ʃ/ [...] as well as the labio-dental fricatives /f/ and /v/” (pg. 117): That is, while the alveolo-palatal fricatives [ç] and [ʒ] are phonemes on pg. 115, on pg. 117 they are suddenly relegated to the status of allophones. (A similar issue of inconsistent terminology pops up again on pg. 202–203 with regard to graphemes and allographs.) It is this terminological inconsistency, as it appears to me, which weakens the already unclear purpose of the whole chapter, especially for readers who might have less familiarity with Luxemburgish. I also wonder if it would have been sufficient to present the same information of Section 4.2 more economically in the form of a table (e.g. sound, graphematic rendering, example word, source) at the end of the chapter or at the end of the monograph in an appendix with pertinent references to the sources in which the distribution of the sounds is described.

The empirical part of the monograph begins, rather abruptly, in Chapter 6 “Graphematics”. The chapter does not provide an introduction to the graphematics of Standard Luxemburgish, as the name of the chapter and its position relative to the previous chapter might suggest. Instead, the purpose of this chapter is to analyze “the graphemes and their phonological values” (pg. 120). The empirical analysis is based on a random sample of 475 random graph sequences (pg. 121). Section 6.3 provides an analysis of vowel graphemes, Section 6.4 an analysis of consonant graphemes. In each section, first the monographemes and then the polygraphemes are described in terms of the phonological values that they represent, their relative position in the syllable structure of a place name, and subsequently categorized according to their absolute frequency of occurrence. Sprinkled throughout these sections is some discussion regarding the occurrence of particular graphemes (e.g. pg. 139 on <o>, pg. 144 on <ao>, pg. 146 on <ää>, and pg. 177–178 on <ao’>). For example, on pg. 200–201, readers learn that the grapheme <t> and its “allographs” <tt>, <th>, and <dt> (the latter three of which are then later in the same section somewhat confusingly referred to as “graphemes”, cf. above) render the voiceless plosive /t/, but that they differ in terms of the kinds of vowel quantities they indicate (e.g. <th> occurs after a long vowel, <tt> after a short vowel). Moreover, while <t> occurs 3,525 times in word onset versus 36,754 times and 32,538 times in word medial and word final position, respectively, <th> occurs 978 times in word onset, 2,503 times in word medial position, and 242

times in word final position, and <tt> occurs 3,169 times in word medial and 933 times in word final position. Indeed, the chapter contains a plethora of such descriptive findings. Nevertheless, readers unfortunately appear to be left in the dark regarding two methodological issues: First, it was unclear to me as to how the author determined the correspondence between graphemes and phonemes; and second, it is left unexplicit as to which criteria the author applied with regard to the assignment of a letter to grapheme or allograph status. To be fair, though, the example <t>, <tt>, <th>, and <dt> given above appears to indicate that this decision was based on frequency. In addition to the above statistics, the author also reports the absolute number of occurrences for each grapheme in relation to different syllable positions, which gives an impression of the relevance of these categories. Although the chapter closes in Section 6.5 with a table summarizing the correspondences between phoneme and graphemes, the inclusion of the frequency counts would have facilitated access to the information. Furthermore, given the fact that the corpus is built up of different data sets stemming from different periods of time (e.g. the *Grand Atlas du Comte de Ferraris* stems from 1777), and are hence based on different writing traditions, it seems as though it could have been fruitful to more systematically differentiate these different traditions in the graphematic analysis.

Chapter 7 “Phonological Developments”, the second longest chapter (pg. 219–313), is structured according to short vowels (pg. 221–260), long vowels (pg. 260–277), diphthongs (pg. 277–294), and related phonological processes such as umlaut, syncope, and apocope in addition to epenthesis and then according to phonological processes related to consonants such as the second consonant shift, velarization, assimilation, and dissimilation as well as metathesis, *n*-Elision, among others. Section 7.2 “Vowels” builds the bulk of the chapter and goes through each modern Standard Luxemburgish phoneme and its related phonological processes. For the vocalic developments, the text is structured first according to the phoneme, then the relevant sound change is provided in a formula, which is then followed by references to the relevant literature for that sound change, which, in turn, is complemented with two examples from the corpus to illustrate each respective development. The decision as to which phonological developments were to be included appears to be based on Bertrang (1921) and Palgen (1948) (cf. pg. 219–220). To illustrate this section, an example will suffice: Luxemburgish /u/ emerges from /o:/ regardless of the phonological context, exemplified in the place name *Muselwues* (originally used to designate a meadow close to the Moselle River, cf. pg. 259–260). Unfortunately, I was unable to discern which historical

sounds the phonological developments make reference to as this information is not explicitly provided for in the text or in the formulae.

Chapter 8 “Morphological and Morphosemantic Phenomena” aims to give “an overview of the morphological phenomena exhibited by named places in Luxemburg” (pg. 314). Section 8.1 deals with inflectional features of place names: It turns out that the dative case is, with an overwhelming majority, the most frequently occurring case in place names (pg. 316); to the extent that grammatical gender is indicated through an article word, three fourths of place names belong to the feminine gender (pg. 316); and, place names more often have a singular marking than a plural marking (pg. 317). In Section 8.2, the corpus of place names is analyzed in terms of inflected and non-inflected word classes that make up these place names. For example, nouns turn out to be, I think rather unsurprisingly, the most frequent word class category to constitute Luxemburgish place names (pg. 319); moreover, prepositions constitute the second most frequent category (pg. 334). This chapter is largely descriptive in nature; nonetheless, as a reader, I often missed reference to parallels, for example, either in other kinds of names such as surnames (perhaps with reference to Gilles, Kollmann & Muller 2014) or in the toponyms of other European countries. Moreover, in my opinion, the chapter could similarly have benefited from a more thorough grounding in the linguistic literature. For example, Section 8.2.2.3 deals with prepositions in place names, and, while it does make brief reference to preposition-article clusters (pg. 338–339), it could have better based the phenomenon in recent work on preposition-article clusters, which the author even mentions in passing on pg. 338, both in the body text and in Footnote 244. Furthermore, and more importantly, it would have been interesting to have examined the names more systematically with regard to their morphological features based on the kind or subclass of micro-toponym. For example, as mentioned above, the present study found that micro-toponyms are more often morphologically singular than plural (pg. 317). However, this figure appears to be based on all of the micro-toponyms examined in the study and, hence, does not distinguish different micro-toponymic classes. This appears interesting because at least according to Tyroller (1996: 1430), for example, what are called *Flurnamen* in the German tradition occur more often in plural than in the singular: One might therefore ask as to whether such general trends that the author observed in his data are also valid across different sub-types of such names that the author does not distinguish. I believe that future work could pick up here.

“Word Formation” is the title of chapter 9, in which the author investigates word formation processes such as univerbation, compounding, and derivation, especially on nouns, to investigate “how meta-semantic concepts underlie the cre-

ation of words as used in the names given to the human surrounding” (pg. 345). The chapter proceeds from the observation that those place names that have a syntactic length of one consist of one syllable core in approximately 12% of cases, and that, hence, “simple nouns have a tendency to occur less often than compounds or derivations” (pg. 346). However, this conclusion does not appear entirely warranted to me since the presence of multiple syllables does not necessarily have to be due to processes of word formation, but could instead be due to remnants of inflectional morphology. It might therefore have been desirable to complement this quantitative finding with a more systematic analysis, perhaps based on a sample of the whole corpus or perhaps through additional qualitative analysis. The purpose of Chapter 10 “The Onomasticon” is to “to study the categorical possibilities of semantic ideas expressed by the Luxembourgish onomasticon, [sic!] as well as to highlight quantitative aspects thus to sustain any qualitative analysis” (pg. 374). One interesting finding in this chapter is that, in spite of the fact that Luxembourg lie at the Romance-Germanic language border, “the extent of [the] Moselle Romance part of the onomasticon as reflected by the general corpus is extremely low” (pg. 395).

In Chapter 11 “Syntactical Phenomena”, the author investigates syntactic patterns in Luxembourgish place names since, despite the these patterns of place names being considered “petrified speech acts”, these patterns might nevertheless contain “archaic features” (pg. 401). In Section 11.3, the author offers some interesting, albeit not too unexpected, descriptive statistics about the names in the general corpus. For example, the vast majority of names in the corpus consists of one, two, and three words before dropping off precipitously at the four-word mark (pg. 413). The author further identifies four different types of syntactic patterns that occur in the Luxembourgish place names: 1) names consisting of an nominal phrase (e.g. *Bettling, Burg Knap, roude Strach*), 2) names consisting of a prepositional phrase (e.g. *bei Hahlerbüsch, am Elschterweg, vir op Rennscheed*), 3) names in which “there are always two nouns present per named instance” (pg. 422), i.e. a noun phrase with a prepositional phrase or two prepositional phrases (e.g. *Pesch zwischen der Syr und der Groiff, in Weischterbuch zu der Wanterbeck*), and 4) names with at least three nouns (e.g. *Die Seit der Stengen breck ob der Stroos, in Dieleg Zwischen Zeechen und Dieleg*) (pg. 417–434). In each instance, the author complemented the pattern typology with an example in the form of a phrase structure tree. It remained unclear to me, however, what the purpose of these trees are since the typology is ostensibly based on the number of nominal phrases in a name, and not

on the structural position of a nominal phrase within a name.¹ Lastly, Chapter 12 “Spatial Reference in Luxembourgish Place Names” discusses in which manner spatial relations (e.g. locative, lative) are expressed: The author finds that locative relations are expressed more often. The monograph closes with Chapter 13 “Summary and Perspectives”, in which the author, after a brief résumé, points out some research perspectives such as a call for the use of more historical data in the form of deeds to arrive at a deeper understanding of aspects of word formation in Luxembourgish place names.

In general, the monograph is an attempt at providing a quantitative description of Luxembourgish place names in terms of their spelling, morphology, and syntactic structure, and in this regard, it certainly provides a wealth of interesting descriptive findings. For this purpose, the author developed a toolset that can be expanded for future investigations into this topic. However, I often had the impression that the monograph lost itself in what often appeared to me to be superfluous discussions whose purpose was, frankly, at times lost on me (e.g. Section 11.1–11.2, among others). Moreover, as a reader, I would have appreciated more cross references to similar and parallel findings in the onomastics literature, in particular in Chapters 8–11. For example, in Chapter 11, one reads that “[d]efinite articles occur quite frequently in Luxembourgish named places” (pg. 410). This and other such findings are in line with observations from Bach (1953: 112) who notes that *Flurnamen* “der Regel nach” have a definite article.² At last, and on a rather formal note, I believe that the monograph could have benefited from a more extensive formal revision. I often noticed spelling and comma errors (e.g. “bee” pg. 47, “extend” pg. 49, “adept” pg. 117, “way” pg. 139, “detonated” pg. 224), errors in word choice (“with their relative names” pg. 39, “state of January 2019” pg. 40, “acronym” in reference to *Schonckert*, pg. 47, “a peaceful notion” pg. 66), spacing issues, especially in Chapter 5, incomplete sentences, and, what, at least to me as a native speaker of English, often appeared to be rather clumsy, vague, and/or almost unnecessarily verbose expressions, which, at least for me, hampered reading such a dense volume as the present one.

Summa summarum: The monograph delivers on its promise of briefly surveying Luxembourgish place names graphematically, phonologically, morphologi-

1 Moreover, the trees appear to suggest a productive derivational pattern; however, since the syntactic patterns are “petrified speech acts” (pg. 401), it would appear to me to be methodologically difficult to establish the structural relations between the elements without a more in-depth historical treatment.

2 Of course, to be fair, Chapter 7 contains extensive reference to such information.

cally, and syntactically as well as offering a toolset to future researchers. What I often missed in the monograph, however, was a more explicit reference to historical and diachronic aspects, especially in Chapters 6, 8–11. In essence, I agree with the author's estimation that "the present survey is but a relatively broad basis for possible future research" (pg. 479). I also agree with the author that the creation of an etymological dictionary based on the general corpus would be a worthwhile pursuit (pg. 480). I think it would be similarly worthwhile to analyze features in the corpus data regarding geographic patterns (cf. above), which might ultimately provide more hints or aid a historical and diachronic investigation. Certainly, the present monograph will be of some interest to those working in (Germanic and Luxemburgish) linguistics and onomastics as well as language contact, but also to those in disciplines such as legal and economic history.

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