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PLACE NAMES IN PROVERBS AND IDIOMS :

A comparative study of English, French and German

Bruno Delaroche

Everybody knows a few proverbs which include toponyms, like “All roads lead to Rome”, but their number is actually rather large and some are even common to several languages, like the one we have just mentioned.

The purpose of the present paper is to analyse the different kinds of proverbs or idiomatic phrases which include toponyms in English, French and German, trying to see if constants exist between these 3 languages and in a second part to present proverbs which are common to these languages and to see if they are used in the same way in each language.

I TOPONYMS IN LOCAL/ REGIONAL PROVERBS OR PROVERBS SPECIFIC TO EACH COUNTRY

In English, a very large number of proverbs include toponyms even if many of them refer to small villages and little known towns or even villages and may have fallen into disuse now. Those referring to bigger cities are more likely to be still used today.

In French the number of proverbs including small villages is not as significant as in English, but we can also distinguish local or regional proverbs and those used throughout the country.

German seems to have fewer proverbs including toponyms than English or French and the place names used in these proverbs are more generally larger towns, or cities famous for a particular reason.

Let us now look at the circumstances under which these proverbs or idiomatic phrases are used

1 IRONICAL USE

Some proverbs are used to describe a particular situation, sometimes by establishing an ironical comparison with a local reality :

Always behind, like the Moberley clocks

Bare as the Bishop of Chester (known to be particularly rich)

Too dear for the Bishop of Durham.

Il n’y a pas de moine à Acey, qui n’ait sa gouine à Brésiley (every monk in Acey has a mistress in Brésiley)

Le chanoine de Chartres peut jouer aux dés et aux cartes (the canon of Chartres can play dice and cards)

Fromm wie der Shultze aus Konradswald (as pious as the Konradswald mayor)
Zu Rom gewesen und den Papst nicht gesehen ! (having returned from Rome
without having seen the Pope)

2 HUMOUROUS USE

In other cases, proverbs can be used in a humourous way, the nuance between
humour and irony being sometimes rather difficult to establish.

To be married at Finglesham church (there is no church in Finglesham but a
place where it is common for lovers to meet)

He is a representative of Berkshire/Barkshire (used to describe somebody who
keeps coughing)

I see you come from Bardney (referring to someone who always leaves doors
open)

The mayor of Altringham lies in bed while his breeches are mending,
a proverb very similar to a French one :

Gentilhomme de Beauce reste au lit quand on raccommode ses chausses

We can observe that proverbs often use alliterative or rhyming structures,
perhaps to make them more incisive and easier to remember, as in the case we
have just mentioned or again in

Aux enfants de Saint-**Godard**, si l'esprit ne vient **tôt**, il vient **tard** (At Saint
Godard if children do not get wit early, they get some late)

A Montbo**zon**, il faut trois hommes pour arracher un oignon (In Montbozon 3
men are needed to pick up an onion)

That humourous use can also be observed in German proverbs like

Die Nürnberger hängen Keinen, sie hätten ihn denn zuvor (Nobody has ever
been hanged in Nurnberg because they cannot catch thieves)

Er ist aus Schilda (he comes from Schilda, meaning that he tells strange stories)

Er ist reif für Allenberg (he is ripe for Allenberg, a lunatic asylum)

Er ist aus Wartenburg (he comes from Wartenburg) which means that he always
does things slowly) or

Er glüht wie Rastenburg (he glows like Rastenburg) which means that he is
drunk or too excited.

Er hat die Schöneberger Universität besucht (He studied at Schöneberg
university = he is very proud of himself)

3 CRITICAL USE

Proverbs are also often used to describe some persons or communities in a critical way, sometimes by referring to qualities they seem to be deprived of, or to expose their faults, real or supposed, such proverbs often testifying to prejudices against these communities :

Yorkshire born and Yorkshire bred, strong in the arm and weak in the head

Here again we can observe the alliterative or rhyming structure mentioned above with a strongly rhythmic pattern, as well plays on words with the use of opposite terms. We can also remark that variants of the same proverb apply to people from Derbyshire, Cheshire and Chepstow.

These preconceptions against people from a place or region are also found in French and German proverbs

A Domfront, on pend les gens sur la mine (In Domfront people are hanged because of their look)

Il ne vient du Morvan, ni bonnes gens, ni bon vent (from Morvan come neither good people nor good wind)

And the same applies to

De Falaise, il ne vient ni **bon** vent, ni **bonnes** gens

De Normandie, **mauvais** vent, **mauvaises** gens

Speyer Wind, Heidelberg Kind und Hessenblut, tun selten gut (Speyer wind, Heidelberg child [**SORRY FOR HEIDELBERG**] and Hesse son rarely bring good)

Among the many proverbs which belong to this category we can also mention

Bishop-Middlham where might rules right

Halifax law (consists in condemning somebody before the trial)

Dover, a den of thieves

C'est un avocat de Valence, longue robe et courte science (He is a Valence lawyer, with a long robe and little knowledge)

Was macht man nicht zu Nürnberg fürs Geld (What wouldn't people in Nuremberg do for money ?)

4 POSITIVE/LAUDATORY USE

Contrary to what we have just mentioned, there are also a few proverbs in these three languages which express a positive point of view on things or people.

However they seem to be less numerous than those of the previous category, at least in French. Here again variants of the same proverbs applying to different places can be found :

Bishop's Nympton for length, South Molton for strength, And Chittlehampton for beauty (references to the churches of those places)
Bloxham for length, Adderbury for strength but King's Sutton for beauty (describing the church spires)
Shipshape and Bristol fashion
There are more saints in Cornwall than in heaven
Lithe as lass of Kent

Si tu veux être heureux, va entre Caen et Bayeux (if you want to be happy go between Caen and Bayeux)
De Tourangeaux et Angevins, bons fruits, bons esprits et bons vins (in the Tours and Angers regions you find good fruit, kind people and good wines)
Si le comté était un mouton, Morogne en serait le rognon (if the county were a sheep, Morogne would be its kidney)

Leben wie Gott in Frankreich (to live like God in France)
Konstanz das größte, Basel das lustigste, Straßburg das edelste, Speyer das andächtigste, Worms das ärmste, Mainz das würdigste, Trier das älteste, Köln das reichste Hochstift
Wäre Leipzig mein, so wollt ich's in Freiberg verzehren (if Leipzig were mine, I would leave it for Freiberg)
Wäre Frankfurt mein, so wollt ich's in Mainz verzehren.
Wäre Naumburg mein, wollt ich's in Jena verzehren.
Wäre Nürnberg mein, wollt ich's zu Bamberg verzehren.

5 WARNING

Danger coming from the sea or rivers is also at the origin of proverbs in these 3 languages

The Bailiff of Bradford is coming (meaning that the river Ouse is nearing flooding level)

The river Dart every year claims its heart. A variant of that proverb says the same about the river Don and the same idea can be found in French and German with

La rivière de Drôme, a tous les ans cheval ou homme (every year the river Drôme drowns a man or a horse) and

Der Rhein will alle Jahr sein Opfer haben (every year the Rhine claims one life),
or Eh einer über den Rhein schwimmt, ertrinken zehne (before one man can
swim across the Rhine, the river will have drowned 10)

Qui voit Ouessant voit son sang, qui voir Molène voit sa peine (whoever sees
Ouessant sees one's blood, whoever sees Molène sees one's sorrow)
Quand tu verras le Blanc Moutier, prends garde au rocher (when you see le
Blanc Moutier, beware of the rock)
Qui passe le Lot, le Tarn et l'Aveyron, n'est pas sûr de revenir à la maison
(whoever crosses Lot, Tarn and Aveyron may never return home)

The idea of fate can also be observed in a few proverbs like

He came safe from the East Indies and was drowned in the Thames or
He escaped the Tees and was drowned in the Tyne

Domfront, ville de malheur, arrivé à midi, pendu à une heure (Domfront,
accursed city, he arrived at noon and was hanged at one o'clock)

6 REFERENCES TO THE WEATHER

Britain being famous for its changeable weather, it is not surprising to notice
that there are quite a lot of proverbs linked to the climate

Barnstable Fair weather/Brough Hill weather (meaning stormy)
It always rains on Crawley Fair day
When Firle Hill and Long Man has a cap, we at Alciston gets a drap

With several variants applying to other places

When Bardon Hill has a cap, Hay and grass will suffer for that
When Bredon Hill puts on its hat, Ye, men of the vale, beware of that
When Billing Hill puts on its cap, Calverly Mill will get a slap
When Fairlight/Fairlie Down puts on his cap, Romney Marsh will have its
sap (Sussex)

Cornwall will bear a shower every day and two on Sunday

French also has quite a lot of local proverbs about the weather but they are
usually associated to saints with a few exceptions like
Le vent vient du côté des pisseuses de Cordillon, il pleuvra bientôt (when the
wind blows from Cordillon convent, it twill rain in Caen).

And in German several proverbs mention the rain or the influence of the weather on crops

Wenn es regnet, muss man's machen wie die Nürnberger und drunter herlaufen (when it rains do like Nuremberg dwellers and run to get shelter).

Grosser Rhein, saurer Wein, kleiner Rhein, süsser Wein (High Rhine, bad wine, low Rhine, sweet wine)

7 REFERENCE TO A LOCAL SPECIALITY

The fact that some places are known for a special activity, or institution or associated to certain symbols is also illustrated in some English and German proverbs whereas in French a toponym related to a speciality is more likely to refer to a dish.

So for instance to say that something is useless, British people can say it is like carrying coals to Newcastle

while the Germans say Eulen nach Athen tragen (to take owls to Athens, with a reference to ancient Greece) or Das heisst Ablass gen Rom tragen (it is like taking plenary indulgence to Rome)

In other cases phrases are used, sometimes ironically or humourously in replacement of the standard expression to describe an ordinary object or a situation metaphorically

For instance Stabbed with a Bridgport dagger means “hanged” in reference to the speciality of the town, hemp, used to make ropes.

Bristol milk is sherry

A Cotswold lion is a sheep

And a Plymouth cloak is a cudgel

In German ein Ragniter machen (to send someone to live in Ragnit) means to send somebody to jail or Er ist reif für Tapiau (in reference to the town prisons)

And a Nürnberger Trichter (a Nuremberg sieve) is an imaginary object supposedly used to cram information into the brain of dumb children

8 CULTURAL REFERENCES

To finish with that part dedicated to proverbs or idioms specific to each language, we can remark that some of them include toponyms which refer to historical events, literary works, or biblical episodes, although the reference may be opaque to many. It is the case in English of

To send somebody to Coventry, which means to ostracize somebody, a phrase which refers to the fact that during the Civil War the royalists who were taken prisoner in Birmingham used to be sent to the Coventry prison. A very similar idiom “to be sent to west Chester” means to banish somebody

In French we use the phrase *Travailler pour le roi de Prusse* (To work for the King of Prussia) to say that the work done will not be paid, an expression whose origin is unclear (and which refers either to the defeat of the Prince of Soubise in Rosbach, or simply to the fact that the mercenaries of the King of Prussia were badly paid)

In German the phrase *Ab nach Kassel* (forward to Kassel) which today simply means let's go is a reference to the forced recruitment of soldiers by England in Hesse during the American War of Independence, the troops gathering in Kassel.

As for the phrase *Ein Ritt über den Bodensee* (a horse ride over Bodensee/Lake Constance) it describes a risky enterprise and it is an allusion to a literary work by

Gustav Schwab (« *Der Reiter und der Bodensee* »).

The Germans also say *Er hat sein Ithaca gefunden* (he has found his Ithaca), a reference to Odysseus' kingdom, considered as a haven of peace.

Biblical references also appear in a few German phrases like *Sich nach den Fleichtöpfen Ägyptens sehnen*, an allusion to the Jews in Egypt which means to miss the good old days

And *Über den Jordan gehen* (to die) a phrase which has a more modern variant with *Nach Mockerau reisen*.

II PROVERBS COMMON TO SEVERAL LANGUAGES

In addition to the proverbs we have mentioned so far and which are mostly specific to each of the languages we analyse, there are also proverbs which are part of the Western cultural heritage and are found in several languages. Some of these proverbs are rather old and have been translated from ancient Greek or Latin. The cities mentioned in those proverbs have been chosen because of their historical or cultural importance, like Rome, a place name present in a large number of proverbs in German but also common in English and French :

Rome was not built in a day

Rome ne s'est pas faite en un jour (with a variant using Paris instead of Rome),

Rom ist nicht an einem Tag erbaut worden (with a variant with Köln [Cologne]).

All roads lead to Rome

Tous les chemins mènent à Rome

Alle Wege führen nach Rom

When in Rome do as the Romans do
Quand tu seras à Rome agis comme les Romains/A Rome comme à Rome

Managing to escape from one danger to be confronted to another is illustrated by
Tomber de Charybde en Scylla
To be caught between Scylla and Charybdis
Szischen Scylla und Charybdis
The order of the names being inverted in French compared to English and German.

Another ancient proverb warns against an excess of pride reminding that
The Tarpeian Rock is close to the Capitol
La Roche Tarpéienne est proche du Capitole
Es ist keine grosse Entfernung vom tarpejische Felsen zum Kapitool

In other instances, the reference can be a historical one as in the phrase
To cross the Rubicon
Franchir le Rubicon
Den Rubikon überschreiten
A reference to Julius Ceasar and which today describes an action fraught with consequences.

We can remark that in some idiomatic phrases, the place name is not used to designate the place itself but an event which happened there. It is the case for instance with
To go to Canossa
Aller à Canossa
Ein Gang nach Kanossa
Which means to humble oneself like the Emperor Henry 4th of Germany pledging allegiance to Pope Gregory 7th in 1077. In that case the whole expression is used metaphorically and the toponym itself is also used metaphorically.

It is the same with
To meet one's Waterloo
Ein Waterloo erfahren
Which refers to Napoleon's defeat, a phrase which is not used in French. To describe such a situation we would rather say "C'est la Bérézina", which refers to another episode of the Napoleonic Wars and the retreat of the army crossing that river (in today's Belarus).

Finally, in other phrases, the reference is a religious one with allusions to episodes of the Old or New Testament. We have some examples with :

Babel (or a Babel Tower), which describes a scene of noise and confusion while the French expression refers more to the confusion of languages that is said to have plagued the place with “une Tour de Babel” like the German expression which uses the adjective derived from Babylon with Babylonische Sprachverwirrung

A place of vice and depravation is described as
Sodom and Gomorrah
Sodome et Gomorrhe
Da herrscht Sodom und Gomorrha

A reference to the New Testament can be noticed in a few phrases like
A Road to Damascus moment/experience
Ça a été son chemin de Damas.
Sein Damaskus erleben/seinen Tag von Damaskus erleben.
The German expression leaves out the reference to the road (or « chemin » used in French) and can be translated as “to live ones’ s Damascus” or to live one’s day of Damascus”, a phrase which recalls Saint Paul’s conversion on that road.

However religious references in idoms are not limited to the Christian religion. The name of one of the most important places in Islam appears in an idiomatic phrase
to say that a place attracts many people or is one of the best of its kinds. We can say for instance that

Le Sud-Ouest est la Mecque de la gastronomie française
The Mecca of French gastronomy
Das Mekka für Gastronomie

CONCLUSION

To conclude, we can say that the number of proverbs or idiomatic phrases with toponyms is rather large in these three languages. We can notice similarities in the way they are used and some which refer to a common cultural heritage are even shared by the three languages (and probably other languages as well), although there may sometimes be a slight difference in their meaning or in the structure of the phrase itself.

I have just mentioned a few of these proverbs. Many more could be added, particularly as regards the proverbs specific to each language, and the study could be extended to other languages too.

