

What is a Surname Variant?

The Thesaurus of British Surnames is subject to two conflicting tendencies:

- to produce a reliable grouping of stable variants, ignoring errors and oddities of individual source documents
- to produce something that can identify all the possible forms found in source documents which might relate to a particular family line, including obvious misspellings.

But we have not decided what the term "variant" means, and there are a number of areas of uncertainty.

A purely linguistic definition of variant might start from an etymological definition:

1. two forms are variants of a single name if they have the same origin.

This implies two further definitions, which can be used as a tests: two forms are variants of a single name if:

2. their differences in spelling do not imply differences in pronunciation, or
3. differences in spelling *do* imply differences in pronunciation, but these can be accounted for by phonological or morphological rules which are valid for English, i.e. the sounds/letters of one can be mapped to those of the other.

But this sounds clearer than it is — what about:

4. patronymics derived from different forms of the same forename? (e.g. Bennett, Benedict; Richards, Hicks)?
5. English and Anglo-Norman forms of the etymologically the same name (e.g. Reynold, Renaud)?

Do affixes create "variants" or separate names? Probably for patronymics (and locatives) in <s> we would say not, but what about:

6. patronymics with other affixes?
7. a group of patronymics derived from the same forename, but with different affixes (e.g. Donald, Donaldson, MacDonald, O'Donald)?

Do we treat as variants:

8. names which are etymologically distinct (and therefore have distinct etymological spellings), but which have the same pronunciation in some dialects (e.g. Shore, Shaw)?
9. names which are etymologically distinct but which could be interpreted as related by phonological rule and are therefore liable to be used interchangeably, (e.g. Alcock, Alcott)?

How are recording errors (in primary sources) regarded?

10. Are there any circumstances in which a recording error be regarded as a variant?
11. Should a very frequent error be treated as a variant, even though formally (by definitions 1–3) it is not?

I suggest that it would be useful to distinguish between a "match" and a "variant", giving the former a wider definition. A match between one form and another might mean that they are:

- genuine variants on some formal definition such as 1, 2 or 3.
- related but not closely, or related but not generally interchangeable
- not related but confusable
- correct and incorrect forms

We would also need to consider usage evidence from documents, which may affect our categorization. For example, if we find in the records that records relating to the same family use Donald and McDonald or Reynold and Renaud interchangeably, then this will be a good argument that they should be treated as variants, not merely as related.

It will be useful for the Thesaurus to list for any surname all the others which fall into one of these types of match, but to keep the categories separate and reserve the term variant for more precise usage. The Thesaurus should ideally list all matches, but should accord special status to variants as more narrowly defined.

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