

On the origin of the South-African surname Coetzee Jan-Wouter Zwart

The origin of the common South-African family name Coetzee, the tenth most common surname in South-Africa, is somewhat mysterious.¹ South-African family names are often transparently derived from English, Dutch or French (Huguenot) family names, but Coetzee is not. The surname itself is not indigenous to any part of Europe.

The English Wikipedia (s.l. *Coetzee*) states, without reference, that Coetzee derives from Hungarian Kocsi ('from Kocs').² In the absence of a credible narrative, we may discard this as folk etymology.³ More interestingly, the Dutch Wikipedia (s.l. *Coetzee*) connects the name Coetzee to a Dirk Couché (1655-1725) who emigrated to the Cape Colony from Kampen (in what is now the Netherlands) in 1679.⁴ This information is based on South-African genealogical research, summarized in the Coetzee article on the South Africa's Stamouers website (see note 4).

As detailed there, 'Couché' was the son of a Gerard Couché and Margarita Claasdogter, and had ten children with his wife, Sara van der Schulp (1654-1728). They settled in Coetsenburg in 1682. If Dirk Couché was the first Coetzee in South-Africa, one can imagine that the name spread relatively rapidly via his prodigious offspring.⁵

The French name Couché suggests that Dirk was from a Huguenot family in Kampen, and this is the conclusion drawn in the English Wikipedia article on Dirk Coetsee.⁶ However, the name Couché/Coetzee/Coetsee is not listed as a surviving Huguenot name by the Huguenot Society of South Africa.⁷ More seriously, the name is also unknown in current records of Dutch family names.^{8,9} I therefore believe there is room for serious doubt that the person arriving at the Cape on May 8, 1679 was actually named Couché.¹⁰

¹ <http://www.name-statistics.org/za/prenumecomune.php>, retrieved December 5, 2017

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coetzee>, retrieved December 5, 2017. The edit was made on December 29, 2014, by Thkafra, a contributor without linguistics credentials.

³ I would think the same goes for the theory linking Coetzee to the Northwest French name Coet, itself (questionably) linked to the Old Breton word *coet* (Modern Breton *koad*) 'wood'.

⁴ <https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coetzee>. The article provides a helpful link to the South African genealogy website *South Africa's Stamouers* (<http://www.stamouers.com/stamouers/a-c/101-coetzee-dirk>) which has information instrumental to the analysis in this squib. I have not been able to consult N.A. Coetzee's *Die stamouers Coetzee en nageslagte*, self-published in Johannesburg, 1979, which is quoted at some length in the greeff.info file on Dirk Coetzee (see note 10).

⁵ The fortunes of some of Dirk's sons is recounted in Susan Newton-King, 'Sodomy, race and respectability in Stellenbosch and Drakenstein, 1689-1762: the story of a family, loosely defined', *Kronos* 33 (2007), p. 6-44. Dirk's father is identified there as Gerhard Coetse (p. 6). Whether this is more than a reconstruction, I cannot say, but the conclusion reached in this squib implies that the father could not have been named Coetse.

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dirk_Coetsee, retrieved December 5, 2017.

⁷ <http://www.hugenoot.org.za/surname.htm>, retrieved December 5, 2017. Nor is any of the other spelling variants of the name, such as Couse (1680), Catsie (1682), Coetse (1692), or Coetsè (1713). See the Dirk Coetzee file on <http://www.e-family.co.za/ffyg6/p6697.htm#c6697.2>. Interestingly, this detailed record does not give Couché as Dirk's name, only as the name of Dirk's father.

⁸ The Meertens Institute database of Dutch family names yields no hits for the name Couché (<http://www.cbgfamilienamen.nl/nfb/>), tested December 5, 2017; the same is true for the online telephone directory (<https://www.detelefoongids.nl>), tested December 5, 2017.

⁹ The name Couché is also rare in France, with 418 births between 1891 and 1990. (<http://www.geopatronyme.com/cgi-bin/carte/nomcarte.cgi?nom=couch%E9&submit=Valider&client=cdip>, retrieved December 5, 2017).

¹⁰ For the exact date, see the Dirk Coetzee file on the greeff.info website, retrieved December 5, 2017 (<http://www.greeff.info/tng01/getperson.php?personID=I23454&tree=Greeffe-SAGI>). This website also reports on the naval records of Dirk Coetzee, who was apparently employed by the Dutch East India Company (VOC) as Dirk Coesie. This name is also not found in the Dutch family name database, suggesting an orthographic error, possibly due to spelling by ear, but significantly a far cry from Couché (see also note 15).

The fact that the immigrant's family came to be known as Coetzee, and that he gave the name Coetsenburg to the Stellenbosch estate granted to him by Simon van der Stel in 1682, only three years after his arrival, suggests that he himself was unhappy with the rendition of his family name as Couché. So what could Dirk's name have been?

I suggest that we take the pronunciation of the name Coetzee as our starting point. The name is currently pronounced [kut'sɪə] in Afrikaans, [kʊts'i:] in English. We may safely assume that the English pronunciation is guided by the orthography, so that the first syllable of the name can be fixed as [kut]. The second syllable is stressed, starts with [s] and has a long, diphthongized coda.¹¹

Diphthongization of long vowels is common enough in current Afrikaans.¹² But Donaldson does not mention [ɪə] (or [iə] or [i̯ə]) among the diphthongs of Afrikaans, suggesting that [ɪə] is part of the original name. We know that Dirk came from the Kampen area, where (as in East Netherlandic more generally) long vowels are monophthongized, but vocalization of final -r may give rise to a secondary diphthong (as in [hɔ:ə] for *hoor* [hɔ:r]). Moreover, we find in the dialect of Wijhe, not far from Kampen, that [i:] is monophthongized as [e:], yielding [e:ə] with word final -r.¹³

I have no information on the exact vowel quality of East Netherlandic [e:ə] in the Kampen area in the 17th century, but my observation of the current dialects suggests that the vowel may be more lax, approaching [ɪ:ə]. This would bring us close to the current pronunciation of the final vowel in the Afrikaans surname Coetzee.

If [ɪ:ə] in the Kampen area derives from [i:r], we can reconstruct Dirk's family name as Koetsier (Standard Dutch [kut'si:r]). Koetsier is a common enough name in the Netherlands (with 1.164 registrations in the year 1947 and 1.953 sixty years later), showing a concentration in the western parts of Gelderland and Overijssel bordering on the IJsselmeer, which includes the Zwolle/Kampen region.¹⁴ I hypothesize, then, that the name of the founding father of the Afrikaans Coetzee family line was Dirk Koetsier.¹⁵

It must be accepted, on this scenario, that Dirk Koetsier was erroneously registered as Couché when he first set foot on South-African soil. From this perspective, the name Coetzee must have come into use later as an attempt to correct the official spelling, guided by the name bearer's own pronunciation of his name (i.e. with final [ɪ:ə]).

This scenario entails that the registrar interpreted [ɪ:ə] as [e:], and wrote it as -é, and [u], Dutch -oe-, as [u], written -ou- as in French. From this it may be inferred that the registrar took Dirk to be French, like so many immigrants at the time. From this mindset, he must have wrestled with the consonant cluster [ts], which could have been rendered as -tz-, but the slightest (perceived) palatalization might have induced him to opt for -ch- instead. And finally, he must have decided to render [k] as c-.

For that final choice, we can hardly blame him. After all, we know that even a good old Germanic name like *Karel* [karəl] may perfectly well be written with initial C.

5 december 2017
on the occasion of my friend Carel Jansen's retirement

¹¹ The prosodic pattern argues against the reconstruction as the family name as Coetse ['kutsə], see note 5.

¹² See Bruce Donaldson, 1993, *A grammar of Afrikaans* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter), p. 8.

¹³ Philomène Bloemhoff-de Bruijn, 1994, *Het dialect van Wijhe* (Kampen: IJsselakademie), p. 16.

¹⁴ Information from the Meertens Institute database of Dutch family names, tested for Koetsier on December 5, 2017 (<http://www.cbgfamilienamen.nl/nfb/>).

¹⁵ As we saw in note 10, Dirk was registered as Coesie by the VOC. I suspect that this is partly an error, in leaving out the -t-, and partly an approximate rendition of Dirk's own pronunciation, with a vocalized word final -r.