

FACTORS PROMOTING LINGUISTIC BORROWING

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Abstract:

The borrowing of English words in contemporary Romanian is a phenomenon which has fuelled a considerable amount of public debate, sometimes being described as an invasion and a threat to the language. In this context, the analysis of those factors that promote inter-language transfers in general can help us understand the mechanisms of this complex process, and encourage a more realistic and objective attitude towards it. The present paper reviews some of the most important contributions on the topic to date, describing the most important factors that promote borrowing, both in isolation and in relation to each other.

Keywords: borrowing, need, prestige, cultural pressure, language loyalty

1. Definition of borrowing

The metaphor of ‘borrowing’ as used to describe a linguistic phenomenon has been rejected by some language contact writers, as it calls to mind the idea of a voluntary and mutually agreed action, involving a debt on the part of the borrowing language and implicitly the obligation to repay it. Haugen summarizes this criticism as follows:

The metaphor implied is certainly absurd, since the borrowing takes place without the lender’s consent, and the borrower is under no obligation to repay the loan. One might as well call it stealing, were it not that the owner is deprived of nothing and feels no urge to recover his goods. The process might be called an adoption, for the speaker

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does adopt elements from a second language into his own. But what would one call a word that has been adopted- an adoptee? (1950: 211). However, he maintains the term and goes on to give a definition of borrowing as

THE ATTEMPTED REPRODUCTION IN ONE LANGUAGE OF PATTERNS PREVIOUSLY FOUND IN ANOTHER. (1950:212)

The factors that trigger this reproduction process are generally recognized to be: the need to designate new realities, the prestige of the source language, internal linguistic factors (homonymy, synonymy in the recipient language), psychological factors (bilingual ability of the borrowing language speakers in the source language, cognitive pressure resulting from the use of two languages) and attitudinal factors (loyalty to one's language). The following sections will discuss these factors and the way they govern each other in contact situations.

2. Need and prestige as promoters of borrowing

In most cases when a language borrows words from another language, it does so in order to fill some lexical gaps existing in its structure, or as a result of some process of influence, be it political, technological, economic or cultural exerted by another culture. This very basic motivation for borrowing was noticed as early as Bloomfield (1933), Haugen (1950), and Weinreich (1968). The latter refers to such lexical gaps as “structural weak points in the recipient vocabulary” and sees “the need to designate new things, persons, places and concepts” (1968: 56) as the main mechanism promoting borrowing:

Lexical borrowings of this type [to designate new things] can be described as a result of the fact that using ready-made designations is more economical than describing things afresh. Few users of language are poets. (1968: 57)

Moreover, Weinreich maintains, borrowing promoted by need can be a useful tool in determining the direction and extent of cultural diffusion between different speech communities, as the loanwords existing in a group's language can indicate what this group has learned from another one. Need as a universal determinant of linguistic borrowing and as reflecting the kind of contact between two speech communities at a given time in history, has been discussed extensively in the literature. Katamba, for example, writes:

At various periods in history, different civilizations have been pre-eminent in one field or another. Normally, the language of the people

who excel in a particular field of human endeavour becomes the international lingua franca of that field (...). Thus, the concentration of borrowed words in certain semantic fields reflects the nature of the contact between speech communities. It reflects the area where new words had to be acquired in order to fill a perceived gap. (1994: 196)

Linguistic need is most actively at work in situations of distant contact, especially in those cases when a community is exposed to new areas of knowledge and experience through contact with others, and wants to keep up and modernize itself by assimilating the latest developments in science, technology, etc. Such motivations have promoted borrowing in different times of history and different settings: from Chinese to Japanese in the Middle Ages, from French, Latin and Greek into English in the Early Modern English period, from Italian into many European languages during the Italian Renaissance, or from the French of diplomacy into other languages in the nineteenth century (Winford, 2003). Finally, the spread of American culture and technology in the contemporary world is paralleled by the borrowing of many English words into almost all languages (Crystal 1997, Grosjean 2001, Myers-Scotton 2006).

Although linguistic need is customarily seen as resulting in cultural borrowing, some writers have given this factor a more generous meaning, without limiting it strictly to this case. Thus, Backus (1996) argues that nearly any source language content word can be considered as filling a lexical gap, mainly because inter-language perfect synonymy does not exist, as the entire range of connotations a given word has cannot be fully rendered by the resources of another language. Conversely, it has often been pointed out that strictly speaking need does not exist, as any language has enough resources to create novel designations for new realities. From this perspective, it is clear that this factor on its own cannot be used to account for all language contact outcomes. Weinreich was among the first writers to draw attention to this fact, by warning that

(...) a full account of interference in a language-contact situation, including the diffusion, persistence, and evanescence of a particular interference phenomenon, is possible only if extra-linguistic factors are considered. (1968: 3).

Among these factors he mentions psychological (bilingual proficiency, attitudes towards each language) and socio-cultural ones (size of bilingual group and the relative prestige of the languages in contact). Within this array

of social and psychological factors, prestige is particularly important, many writers emphasizing its role in determining the direction and extent of borrowing:

If one language is endowed with prestige, the bilingual is likely to use what are identifiable loanwords from it as a means of displaying the social status which its knowledge symbolizes (Weinreich, 1968: 60).

In such cases the borrowing predominantly goes from the upper to the lower language, the upper language being the language of a speech community with more power (political, economic, etc), while the lower language belongs to a subordinated group (Bloomfield 1933).

In situations where borrowing takes place for reasons of prestige or fashion, the recipient language also borrows words for which it has almost perfect equivalents. These “unnecessary” or “gratuitous” loanwords are sometimes interpreted as reflecting laziness and the law of least effort, but also a wish of the borrowing language community to be identified with some aspects of the source language group, especially if this group and its language are considered to be more prestigious. Haugen states this quite explicitly:

Words are often borrowed because they are felt to be prestigious or just novel. This is especially true if the speakers feel inferior to the speakers of the other language, as did the English when they were ruled by the Norman French. The loanword may cause native words to seem inadequate and gradually disused. Hence the many loanwords from Anglo-Norman French in English and from Low German in Scandinavian. (1992: 199 quoted in Myers-Scotton 1993: 172)

The language contact literature contains a very rich body of evidence proving the accuracy of this observation. For example, in a study of French-Dutch contact in Brussels, Treffers-Daller (1999) found that there were ten times as many French borrowings in her Dutch data (2.55%) as there were Dutch words in her French data (0.29%). Since structural factors must have acted equally in one and the same language pair, this situation can be explained solely in terms of the higher status of French as compared to that of Dutch. Similarly, Higa (1979 quoted in Winford 2003) shows that the Japanese community in Hawaii borrowed English base vocabulary such as pronouns (*me, you*), expressions of time (*last year, one month*), kinship terms (*papa, mama, brother, sister*), and expressions of quantity (*thirty, some, too much*), mainly in order to identify with the American culture and society.

Prestige as a factor promoting linguistic borrowing is being increasingly credited as a driving force that can effect deep changes into a language. Myers-Scotton explains this concept as follows:

(...) there is **something more “attractive”** about that language- the attraction largely being associated with the higher prestige of the speakers of that language or its wider use in the community where both languages are spoken. (2006: 210).

This ‘something’ can be understood in terms of a language community having more control over a valued resource, be it political power, socio-economic status or “even cachet”- “being more with it”. For example, she shows that the Norman French in England after 1066 were seen not only as having political power, but also a mode of living which was more civilized and sophisticated. Similarly, the spread of Chinese words in different languages of Southeast Asia, or the incorporation of Portuguese words in many languages around the world in the days of its supremacy on the oceans, can be explained in terms of the relative prestige enjoyed by the communities speaking these languages. More recent examples of loanwords promoted by fashion and prestige include the borrowing of Russian words in the languages of the Soviet republic, and of other Eastern European countries, and of course, the global spread of English.

Prestige can shed some light on the borrowing process and products in situations of distant contact as well. Thus, various kinds of borrowings under this type of contact are actually motivated more by considerations of fashion and prestige than by need (Winford, 2003: 38), for example the spread of English loanwords into many languages across the globe since the mid-twentieth century. An illustrative case in this respect is presented by Loveday (1996, quoted in Winford, 2003: 39), who shows that the use of English loanwords in Japanese advertising has the effect of placing the products or services offered in a superior or more appealing light.

Moreover, prestige and need should not be seen as separate factors, as very often they combine and reinforce each other in a joint effort ultimately leading to borrowing. Thus, Myers-Scotton (2006: 212) shows that the success of English speakers in making advancements in science and technology promotes the use of English words in the languages of those speech communities that embrace these advancements. At the same time, this success projects an image of English as “the language of modernity, the language of cachet”, with the result that English words enter languages everywhere, and not just in those domains where lexical gaps have to be filled. The interplay of

these two factors, more exactly the disguised presence of prestige even in those cases where need stands out as the most obvious explanation, has led some writers to assign it a position which rules out all the other determinants of borrowing. Moravcsik for example, sees prestige as the only social factor with an explanatory function in the process of borrowing:

(...) nothing can be borrowed from a language which is not regarded prestigious by speakers of the borrowing language. (1978: 109)

Borrowing as promoted by reasons of prestige or fashion is sometimes dismissed as linguistic snobbery, and considered useless or even harmful for the recipient language. Thus, when referring to various Anglicisms that have entered Romanian recently without a linguistic motivation, the Romanian researchers in the field prefer to call them ‘luxury borrowings’ (Stoichițoiu-Ichim, 2001) or “peregrinisme” (Dimitrescu, 1995) the general position held being that they are

(...) împrumuturi inutile, și în unele cazuri chiar dăunătoare. Ele sunt nemotivate sau posedă motivații de tip negative, precum veleitarismul intelectual și afectarea, traduse prin snobism lingvistic, insuficienta cunoaștere a resurselor limbii materne, comoditatea sau graba care – mai ales în cazul ziarștilor – nu le permite să reflecteze asupra echivalentelor lexicale, pentru a alege termenul cel mai adecvat. (Stoichițoiu-Ichim, 2001: 95)

This position is in line with the psycholinguistic approach that sees borrowing as a product of the “most available word” phenomenon, which leads the bilingual to borrow from the other language “especially when he or she is tired, lazy, or under stress.” (Grosjean, 2001: 311). However, also speaking from a psycholinguistic perspective, the specialized literature claims that a foreign word may be introduced almost unconsciously into the speech of an individual as a result of intense bilingualism. This means that, far from being a manifestation of ignorance, snobbery or laziness, borrowing is a natural process, which goes largely unnoticed by those using it (Myers-Scotton, 2006).

The notions of “need” and “prestige” are not only connected to each other, but they are also firmly rooted into the larger social and cultural context within which language contact takes place (Mougeon and Beniak 1991, Winford 2003, Myers-Scotton 2006). Of particular importance within this overarching socio-cultural framework, are the notions of “intensity of contact” and “cultural pressure”. At a macro-social level, intensity of contact can be

defined in terms of demographic ratios, sociopolitical relationships between the language groups, the length of contact, as well as the degree of bilingualism across groups. As we move from societal to individual level, intensity of contact receives different dimensions, becoming a function of occupational factors (when a subject is frequently discussed in a particular language, this can cause interference when the same subject is discussed in another language as well), and of the frequency with which a bilingual uses his two languages (Beardsmore, 1982: 49). These theoretical predictions are verified by real speech data. Thus, in a study of English borrowings in the French of French Canadians, Mougeon and Beniak (1991) have shown that core borrowings (the conjunction *so*) tend to appear in the language of bilinguals who regularly use both of their languages, the relative frequency of language use actually outweighing degree of bilingualism in itself. Cultural pressure is a “function of the social motivations that promote the adoption of foreign features into a group’s L1”, including the social and economic advantages that follow from such borrowing, for example social advancement, employment, educational opportunity (Winford, 2003: 29).

3. Internal linguistic factors as promoters of borrowing

In addition to the social and cultural determinants of borrowing described above, internal linguistic factors can also trigger the adoption of words from one language into another. Perhaps the most comprehensive account of these factors was put forth by Weinreich (1968: 57-60) in his seminal work on language contact, where he noted that

(...) the designative inadequacy of a vocabulary in naming new things is not the only cause of lexical innovation. Internal linguistic factors also contribute to the innovating process. (1968: 57)

A first element that can promote lexical borrowing is homonymy in the recipient language: when two native words sound very much alike, replacing one by a foreign word resolves potential ambiguities. For example, the clash between the words for ‘cart’ (< CARRUM) and ‘meat’ (< CARNEM) in Vognes has determined the borrowing of *voiture* and *viande* from French. However, the mechanism by which borrowing solves ambiguity is not universal and it can even be reversed, sometimes lexical interference producing, rather than solving homonymy. For example, Amer. Polish has borrowed the English *moving* as *muviq*, in spite of the existence of the homophonous *moviq* ‘speak’. Similarly, a large number of English borrowings

in contemporary Romanian have brought about considerable homonymy in this language: *brand (marca) vs brand (cannon)*, *panel (group of experts) vs panel (piece of wood)*, *spot (beam of light) vs spot (TV commercial)*, *flash (important piece of information) vs flash (electronic memory)*, *pick-up (record player) vs pick-up (type of vehicle)*, etc.

Borrowing can also be related to the constant need for synonyms in certain semantic fields, for example emotions, food, and communication. Affective words have a well-known tendency to lose their expressive force, and as a result, many languages experience a constant need for synonyms, or “an onomastic low-pressure area, as it were.” (Weinreich 1968: 58). This is especially true for semantic fields like ‘talking’, ‘beating’, ‘sleeping’, ‘tallness’, or ‘ugliness’, and can be illustrated with examples from different language pairs. For instance, loanwords from Finnish into dialectal Russian, which cannot be explained as a result of cultural diffusion or prestige considerations, can be included into this category, Weinreich believes. Similarly, we think that English words like *cool*, *trendy* or *OK* are attracted by such a semantic low-pressure area in Romanian, which seems to be in constant need of words to describe and qualify situations, people, objects, etc. In addition to these examples, Stoichițoiu-Ichim (2001) is of the opinion that *leader* has been borrowed into Romanian as a result of a perceived need to find a synonym to the native *conducător*, which has been compromised due to its association with the communist regime and Ceaușescu.

Another internal factor that can contribute to lexical innovation is the low-frequency of some words. Due to their limited usage, these words are less stable and more likely to be replaced, in a way that makes it very easy for foreign words to penetrate the language. We believe that the borrowing of many English words into Romanian is supported by the relatively peripheral character of their native equivalents, in addition to communicative and symbolic motivations.

4. Attitudinal factors as promoters of borrowing

Ideological and attitudinal factors constitute another category of elements that can influence the borrowing process (Weinreich 1968, Thomason 2001, Winford 2003, Myers-Scotton 2006). Thus, loyalty to one’s native language and pride in its autonomy may result in the rejection of any foreign incursions, constituting an important predictor for the borrowing behavior of different languages. Myers-Scotton (2006) presents the example

of German, which, at the time when the phone was invented, preferred to call it *Fernsprecher* ('far' + 'speaker') instead of borrowing the English word. An even more obvious instance of attitudinal and ideological barriers to foreign importations is what she calls "cultural borrowing in reverse", or the replacing of existing borrowings with native words. For example, after Turkey freed itself of the Ottoman domination in the 1920s, the Arabic script was replaced by the Latin alphabet and the newly created Turkish Language Society for the Purification of the Language replaced Arabic words with Turkish –based words.

Although warning that the notion of 'attitude' is rather vague and difficult to make more precise, Thomason (2001: 77) believes that it can overrule structural and social factors, speakers' attitudes sometimes producing exceptions to the soundest generalizations that can be formulated. For example, she shows that although under strong cultural pressure from English, Montana Salish speakers preferred to construct new words out of their native lexical stock in order to designate items new to their culture, rather than borrow words from English. For instance, the word for automobile - *p'ip'uyšn* literally meaning 'wrinkled feet'- is composed entirely of native Salish morphemes, while other new words in the language are a result of semantic borrowing or calquing on the model of English expressions. At the opposite pole are speech communities which have borrowed so much that their language was radically and almost unrecognizably changed, preserving very little of its original lexical and grammatical inventory. Examples in this respect are the Laha speakers of Indonesia and Ma'a speakers of Tanzania, who replaced their grammars by Malay and Bantu grammar respectively. Such different situations and reactions to language change can only be accounted for in terms of very different attitudes towards it, the author concluding that "Attitudes can be either barriers to change or promoters of change" (Thomason, 2001: 85).

5. Conclusions

An important thing that must be remembered in connection to the various factors promoting borrowing is that they usually act in combination rather than alone. Different writers in the field have drawn attention to this important idea:

The borrowing of any word can be explained by one or several of the various enumerated causes of lexical interference. (Weinreich, 1968: 61)

We prefer to consider what happens to languages in contact as the result of universally present processes, based on the political-social relations of the speakers, their demographics, and their innate linguistic predispositions. (Myers-Scotton, 2006: 210)

For example, Grosjean (2001: 336) shows that French has borrowed *boyfriend* and *girlfriend*, for two reasons: the French words *fiancé(e)*, *compagnon/compagne*, *concubine/concubine* and *amant/maitresse* were felt to be too formal and old-fashioned (a need for synonyms in this field), and the new words were better suited to express the modern relationship between man and woman, which has been influenced in part by American culture (cultural diffusion). Similarly, many of the English words borrowed into Romanian after 1989 that are generally regarded as being gratuitous, e.g. *job*, *staff*, *trend*, *trader*, *deal*, may fulfill the same functions mentioned above (synonymy creation and the designation of new realities) as well as projecting connotations of modernity and power (prestige).

The factors discussed in this paper must be regarded with the following provision: they represent necessary but not sufficient conditions for borrowing. This means that the presence of one or several of these factors in a given language contact situation does not guarantee that borrowing will take place. Language change is an unpredictable process, the result of a complex interplay of various socio-cultural, psychological and structural factors which can conspire to promote borrowing, or on the contrary to hinder it. While linguistic borrowing is almost always the result of several of these factors, it is difficult to predict or even to retrospectively explain how they combine in the process.

6. References

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