



An Ecolinguistic Approach to Language Contact and Lexical Borrowing in Chinese

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Abstract

Loanwords have long been recognized as an important part of Chinese vocabulary. With the ever increasing exchanges between China and the West, an immense number of loanwords have flooded into Chinese with unprecedented scale and penetrated every social aspect, which is the natural phenomenon and result of language contact and linguistic diversity. Loanwords have, to a certain extent, altered the linguistic landscape of modern Chinese. The emergence, changes and disappearance of loanwords are similar to the evolution of the natural world with the features and ecological rules of its own. Moreover, the existence and development of language share some intrinsic similarities to some degree with the ecology of natural beings. Ecolinguistics which is a newly emerging linguistic science which integrates ecology and linguistics can be demonstrated and justified in the study of loanwords, since language is inseparable from its environment, and it can never be considered in isolation. Languages can be regarded as entities, which form an ecolinguistic system with their environment, where languages multiply, interbreed, vary, influence each other mutually, compete or converge. This system is in interrelation with the environment.

Key words: Language contact; Lexical borrowing; Loanwords; Ecolinguistics

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1. LANGUAGE CONTACT

Language contact is the prerequisite of language borrowing and a direct cause of language fusion. With the development of telecommunication technology and the movement of globalization, language contact takes on new trends in present times. The increase of bilingualism, the wide spread of mass media and the large application of Internet are injecting new life into language contact, and all these are becoming a prominent factor leading lexical borrowing. In addition, language contact can be regarded as the first stage of lexical borrowing.

Language contact can be defined as the interaction between two languages and the effects of such interaction on the phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics of a language. A language is rarely in complete isolation with other languages, but is constantly in contact with others instead, as a result of the social and cultural exchange.

Causes of language change have traditionally been classified into two types: internal and external. Internal causes of change relate to the internal structural properties of language. Internal motivations and mechanisms are still considered by most linguists to be the main and decisive factors for language change. In contrast to the internal causes, language contact is commonly considered to be the external cause of language change. It is confirmed that language change cannot be exclusively interpreted from within the properties of the language system. Although some language changes are actually motivated by internal trends within the language prior to the occurrence of language contact, they would have been less likely to be extended and reinforced if the contact had not happened. In fact, the external causation initiated by language contact serves as crucial impetus to the internal fiend of language development, and the internal linguistic structure in turn facilitates contact-induced change. (Guo, 2005)

When discussing the question of how languages influence each other, the late American linguist and

anthropologist Edward Sapir pointed out that: “Languages, like cultures, are rarely sufficient unto themselves. The necessities of intercourse bring the speakers of one language into direct or indirect contact with those of neighboring or culturally dominant languages. ... Whatever the degree or nature of contact between neighboring peoples, it is generally sufficient to lead to some kind of linguistic interinfluencing.” (Sapir, 1921)

With the development of international exchanges, language contact has become not only inevitable, but also more and more frequent. Generally speaking, all languages contain a certain number of foreign linguistic elements, and once absorbed, these foreign linguistic elements become part of the borrowing language. This is an important way for a language to enrich and replenish itself.

Languages in contact may have different statuses. One language may belong to the superstratum language, which is the prestige or upper language; the other language may belong to the substratum language, which is the less prestigious or lower language. Sometimes there may exist an adstratal relationship (adstratum) between the involved languages, which means the languages in contact are equally prestigious. In substratal and superstratal relationships the influence between the languages in contact are primarily uni-directional, that is, the substratum language is usually more heavily affected than the superstratum one. This is the case with the contact between substratal Chinese and superstratal English. The terms of more prestigious language are more likely to be borrowed into the less prestigious language. Since today English has become the most prestigious language on this planet, at present English is primarily a donor language. In recent decades, China has been in frequent and vigorous contact with the outside world. The Chinese language, as a major means of communication, has been involved in the dynamic process of contact with a number of foreign languages simultaneously. Among all these foreign languages, English has always been the one with which the Chinese language has had the most frequent and comprehensive contact.

2. TYPES OF LINGUISTIC BORROWING

There is a widely accepted typology of linguistic borrowing in which the main criterion is the level where the foreign element belongs: formal (both graphic and phonetic), morphological, semantic, lexical, syntactic, phraseological, and pragmatic. This kind of typology is quite comprehensive, but general linguistics is still in search of a valid general classification of linguistic borrowing or interference, that is, the exchange of linguistic material between two varieties of speech, mainly two languages. The author believes that a classification of borrowing should take into account sociolinguistic factors

such as sex, social status, communicative situation, and register. On one side, we cannot devise a general typology of borrowing on the basis of a few Western languages; on the other, successive attempts to classify borrowing are felt to be partial and imperfect, simply because of the insufficiency of the present systems to cover most of the possibilities of the process and of the results of linguistic integration.

According to Bloomfield, linguistic borrowing can be classified into “cultural borrowing” versus “intimate borrowing”, based on the kind of relationship between the affected languages. However, the most efficient attempts of classification of borrowing should take into consideration the linguistic level affected, and here we might as well classify linguistic borrowing into three categories: 1) lexical borrowing; 2) morphological borrowing; 3) syntactic borrowing.

2.1 Lexical Borrowing

As a common social phenomenon, language contact takes place almost all the time for such reasons as war, migration, colonization, geographical proximity and cultural exchange. Language contact will inevitably lead to linguistic borrowing which is mainly characterized by lexical borrowing, though language contact could lead to a variety of by-products, such as bilingualism, pidgins, creoles, code-switching, etc.

It is unanimously acknowledged that the vocabulary is the least stable component of any language system. Meanwhile, “since vocabulary is perhaps the most visible part of a language, lexical borrowing is perceived as affecting the language in its very being.” (Appel et Muysken, 1987) In this sense, lexical borrowing is no doubt significant in the research of language contact.

Lexical borrowings are generally attributed to several reasons, among which semantic gap is the most obvious one. As far as Chinese language is concerned, new words are needed for those unfamiliar concepts such as unusual foods and drinks, exotic plants and animals, new etiquettes and technologies, etc. Chinese vocabulary will naturally be enlarged by borrowing words completely or partially from the host language.

By means of linguistic borrowing, words or other language elements are adopted from one language or any variety of a language into another language, characteristically with adaptation to the phonology, morphology, and syntax of the adopting language, and frequently with alterations in meaning.

Lexical borrowing is widely believed to be the simplest influence that one language exerts over another language. When such lexical borrowing is a single word, it is called a “loanword”. Lexical borrowing is the adoption of some words from another language, mainly their semantic meanings and morphological forms, some with their sounds. When there is cultural borrowing, it is very likely

that the associated words may also be borrowed. For example, *hotdog* is typical American food and represents American culture, so the word has been borrowed semantically into Chinese as *regou* (*hotdog*), bearing a special cultural flavour. Similar examples include *gewuji* (*kabuki*) from Japanese culture, *tiramisu* (*tiramisu*) from Italian culture, and *桑拿* (*sauna*) from Finnish culture.

2.2 Morphological Borrowing

Morphological borrowing is the direct transference of morphemes. Certain borrowed morphemes are felt to be particularly common within the mass of loanwords introduced into a given language; thus, the speakers of that language analyze these loanwords, identify these morphemes, and become acquainted with them; later on, these foreign morphemes gained great productivity in the receiving language. English has always exerted some influence on the Chinese language, but the influence is reflected not merely in the superficial role of vocabulary supplier, either by phonetic loans or semantic loans, but in the more fundamental role at the morphological level. In fact, the present-day Chinese language has manifested a number of English-influenced features.

2.3 Syntactic Borrowing

Syntactic borrowing always takes the form of morphemic substitution because, as some scholars state, syntactic borrowing deals with relations, not with mere words. Syntactic borrowing is sometimes difficult to separate from morphological borrowing: as we have already seen, the latter implies the transference of morphemes and morphological patterns; syntactic borrowing, on the contrary, takes into account grammatical relations, especially those of order, agreement, and dependence. Sometimes, the construction is completely unknown in the recipient language.

3. LOANWORDS IN LANGUAGES

The increasingly frequent exchanges that take place in politics, economy and culture have provided a vital opportunity for the mutual impact and penetration in languages, for which the most evident proof is the ubiquitous adoption of loanwords in almost every social aspect. In other words, loanwords are the product of cultural exchange and linguistic contact.

Many of those loanwords are adopted into a language together with the ideas they stand for. That is why loanwords are regarded as “the messenger of alien cultures” in that they embody the communications between different cultures as well as enrich the vocabulary of languages.

Loanword, an important social-linguistic phenomenon, is the result of cultural exchanges and language contact. During the cultural exchanges with a foreign nation, any

living language will possibly borrow some words that do not exist in the language but are indispensable for the social development, and the need to designate new things and concepts is obviously a universal cause for lexical borrowing. Actually, Chinese has long had a tradition to absorb loanwords. The *Dictionary of Loanwords in Chinese* that was published in 1984 contains well over 10,000 loanwords both in ancient and modern times.

English is so influential and global that we all too easily forget that there are other important languages which are important sources of ideas and loanwords for Chinese. Apart from English, Chinese has also borrowed from many languages including Sanskrit, English, Japanese, Russian, German, French as well as the languages of the minor ethnic groups in China. For example, Chinese borrowed many words from Sanskrit when Buddhism was introduced into China, such as *pusa* (*bodhisattva*), *emitufo* (*Amitabha*); Chinese also borrowed *tatami* (*tatami*) and *roudao* (*judo*) from Japanese, *duma* (*Duma*) and *futejia* (*vodka*) from Russian, *balei* (*ballet*) and *xiangbin* (*champaign*) from French.

When we probe into the history of China and Chinese language, we can easily find that there have been three peak periods when Chinese massively absorbed loanwords.

The first period was the Han and Tang dynasties, when China initiated its cultural communications with foreign countries and Buddhism was first introduced to China. Many Sanskrit loanwords connected to Buddhism like “*pusa*” (*Bodhisattva*), “*damo*” (*dharma*) were adopted by the Chinese language, and most of those words have become an essential part of the Chinese vocabulary that Chinese people use today in their daily life.

The second peak period was from 1850s to 1919, when Qing Dynasty was forced to open its door to western powers after the first Opium War, and Western cultures poured in and communications between China and the West are becoming more frequent. Many Chinese intellectuals advocated learning from the West. As many western missionaries came to China, and western culture was introduced into China, many elements of Indo-European languages, particularly English, were absorbed into the Chinese language, such as “*salong* (*salon*)”, “*jihe* (*geometry*)”, “*qiaokeli* (*chocolate*)”, “*wutuobang* (*utopia*)”, and “*kafei* (*coffee*)”. Besides, an essential feature of the period is that most loanwords got more than one translation version.

Since China’s reform and opening up in late 1970s, there has been a third peak period for the influx of loanwords into Chinese, thanks to the increasingly intense cultural exchanges and the maturity of people’s ideology. A multitude of technological, cultural, medical and informational words have been borrowed into China, making Chinese language more and more expressive. During this large-scale and never-ending influx, the

loanwords have exerted unprecedented influence on Chinese language. Entering the new millennium, with China merging faster into the outside world, Chinese people have experienced a drastic change in their cultural mindset, linguistic concept and even mentality, so they have become less reluctant to resist the impact of foreign cultures and foreign languages. All these factors have led to another mass production of loanwords in Chinese, with various new words and new notions from diverse aspects involved, and more translation methods and strategies established.

The Chinese language has been involved in the dynamic process of contact with a number of foreign languages simultaneously, among which English has always been the one with which the Chinese language has had the most frequent and comprehensive contact. The absolute majority of loanwords in Chinese originated from English, the most widely used language in the world --not only the language of business, but also of transportation, travel, communication and diplomacy. English has a reputation of being a global language. It is spread over the entire world and is known by many ordinary, as well as educated, people. In a sense, English has become a lingua franca and exerted increasingly great influence on other languages of the world. In fact, as an "international language", English has proved itself extremely competent in imbibing foreign words from a wide range of other languages. It is estimated that English has a vocabulary of over one million and loanwords amount to as many as 500,000, that is, 50% of the total (Bloomfield, 1933). Moreover, according to later statistics, "about 80% of the 20,000 most frequently used English words are loanwords" (Fromkin et Rodman, 1983). *A Dictionary of Loanwords in English* (1990) contains 15,000 entries covering words from about 50 foreign languages, and the proliferation of loanwords has always been on the rise. There is every reason for us to believe that the incessant assimilation of loanwords contributes much to the formation of the colossal English vocabulary, which facilitates English in expressing itself more freely and effectively. Since English is the most widely used language, we have always received a lot of English loanwords throughout history.

4. ECOLOGY OF LOANWORDS IN CHINESE

According to *American Heritage Dictionary*, ecology is defined as "the branch of sociology that is concerned with studying the relationships between human groups and their physical and social environments". Etymologically, the word "ecology" which originated from ancient Greek indicates the knowledge of house and our living environment, but now it has spread rapidly in the 20th century from technical to general use to mean the study of the interaction of people with their natural environment.

The term "language ecology" is a metaphor derived from the study of living beings, based on the biological analogy that one can study languages as one studies the interrelationship of organisms with and within their environments. Now language ecology is not just a figure of speech but a recognized field of study.

Language ecology, also known as ecolinguistics, is a newly emerging linguistic science which integrates ecology and linguistics. Ecolinguistics is the study of languages in relation to one another and to various social factors. This field of linguistics was pioneered by Professor Einar Haugen in his book *The Ecology of Language*. Haugen defined language ecology as "the study of interactions between any given language and its environment." (Haugen, 1972)

Ecolinguistics is a new paradigm of linguistic research which took into account not only the social context in which language is embedded, but also the ecological context in which societies are embedded, and it makes linguistics relevant to the issues and concerns of the 21st century, particularly the widespread destruction of ecosystems. So, ecolinguistics can provide us with a brand-new research perspective.

By using the analogy from ecology and environment, Haugen created a metaphor with which a new approach to multilingualism and language diversity was made possible.

Haugen's paradigm is now chiefly used for the topic of the situation of languages competing with each other in a society, community or country, even the whole world. There is a continuous cycle of influences between the world and languages, an ecological interaction, so to speak.

People have become more and more focused on language ecology in the 21st century, when ecolinguistics has become an independent language subject. Keeping the abundance and diversity of language is as important as keeping natural ecological balance.

4.1 Loanwords in Present-day Chinese Media

Since late 1970s when China opened up, many new things and ideas have been introduced into China, and loanwords have flooded into Chinese language. According to the statistics, there are nearly 10,000 loanwords in Chinese, including 2,000 transliterations, borrowed from over 20 languages like English, Japanese, Sanskrit, Latin, Greek, Italian, Russian, French and German. In the recent years, however, with the emerging of Internet, loanwords in Chinese have also undergone great changes. Generally speaking, there are four apparent features as follows:

4.1.1 The Increase of Lettered Words

Lettered words refer to words that are completely or partially composed of Latin letters. While Chinese people still find it practical to use Chinese characters when adopting new foreign terms and modern concepts, there has been an obvious tendency that a growing number of

lettered words have entered Chinese media and Chinese vocabulary. With the development of information technology and exchanges between the West and the East, immense numbers of lettered words from various fields are being used frequently in Chinese media and people's daily life. They seem to have become international words since they are condensed in form, expressive in meaning, and very conducive to communication.

The increase of the lettered words in Chinese is due to many reasons. Firstly, some foreign words can hardly be translated, neither by phonetic nor semantic translation, like mp3, CD, DNA, CEO, DIY and CDMA. Secondly, the principle of conciseness is also an important factor, people prefer using GDP instead of the long phrase *guonei shengchan zongzhi* (gross domestic product). Moreover, with the great improvement of people's education and acceptability, lettered words are becoming more popular than ever before. Even some professional terms are commonly used in Chinese media, such as CPI, CPU, ADSL, ISO, CTO, and ERP.

In the recent years, there is an obvious tendency that a growing number of original foreign words have penetrated Chinese and they have integrated wholesale into people's daily speech and communication. For examples:

4.1.2 The Increase of Transliterations

Before 1970s when nationalism was prevalent, foreign words were borrowed into Chinese mainly through semantic translation, such as *weishengsu* (vitamin) and *huatong* (microphone), but nowadays people have more interest than ever in transliterations, and they are accepting transliterations more readily than before. Thus there appears a dramatic increase of transliterations in Chinese, especially in the fields of society, culture and life. For example, many words concerning food have become familiar with ordinary Chinese people, such as "*sanmingzhi* (sandwich)", "*pisa* (pizza)", and "*hanbao* (hamburger)". Many words were originally introduced into Chinese through semantic translation, but now their transliterations tend to be more popular. For example, *nailao*, the semantic translation of *cheese*, has been more or less replaced by its transliteration *zhishi* and *qisi*. And it is interesting to notice that some old transliterations are finding favor in Chinese people's eyes again after the translated words took the upper hand for a long time.

4.1.3 The Conversion of Syllable into Morpheme

A syllable in the transliteration of a foreign word does not mean anything itself, while in the recent years there is a new trend for a certain syllable in the transliteration developing into a Chinese morpheme, which is much productive in forming new words. For example, the English word "bar" is translated phonetically as "*jiuba*", but the syllable "ba" is now taken out as a Chinese morpheme indicating a public recreation and leisure place

with particular function and facilities, such as "wangba (Internet bar)", "shuba (book bar)", "taoba (porcelain bar)" and yangba (oxygen bar).

4.1.4 The Proliferation of Cyber-language

As people have entered an information age, Internet has become important and even indispensable for our communication and exchanges. As of June 2010, the number of Chinese Internet users climbed to 420 million, 36 million more than the end of 2009, with 277 million accessing the Internet via cell phones, according to a report released by China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC). In the meanwhile, the Internet language, or rather cyber-language as commonly called, becomes an important part in our everyday life and exerts much impact on our language and society. Nowadays, more and more loanwords are coming into cyber-language and used in the cyberspace to meet the communicational need of "netizens", mostly young people. Among 1,300 entries in *The Dictionary of Chinese Cyber-language*, as many as 224 entries are foreign words, making up 18%. (Liu, 2002:158) Many words in cyber-language have become so popular that they have entered into people's everyday life.

Cyber-language is a special mode of communication, which is different from the written language or the spoken language. With the popularity of network communication, cyber-language will also develop rapidly as a language phenomenon. Cyber-language is characterized by being concise, novel, witty and unstable.

4.2 National Mentality of Chinese

National mentality is what deposits deeply in the spiritual sphere of a nation along the history. It determines thought patterns, behavior and morality and thus distinguishes nations from one another (Li, 1999). As the famous Chinese linguist Zhang Zhigong put, "the words are loaded with the cultural traditions, social customs, and even people's psychological traits and mentality of the nation using this language." (Zhang, 1988)

Gu Jiazuo (1990) pointed out that: "national mentality influences the translation and assimilation of loanwords in Chinese." Therefore, in the following part, the author intends to dwell on the cultural fitness of loanwords in both Chinese and English, especially on the fitness of national mentality of loanwords. In order to prove the close relationship between loanwords and their fitness of national mentality, a comparison of national mentality and its influence on the absorption of loanwords will be carried out.

As is known to all, every nation has its own national mentality which decides the nature and behavior of its people. The English nation is noted for its open-minded characteristic, while the Chinese people are considered as conservative in nature. The national mentality of Chinese

people, greatly influenced by Confucianism which advocates the Doctrine of Mean, has been established for thousands of years. Under the influence of Confucian doctrines, the Chinese mode of thinking is particularly resistant to novelty and change. That is, the Chinese people are unwilling to or reject to absorb new and strange things or concepts, which is also due to the long history of feudal system in China. On the contrary, Western philosophy has exerted a tremendous influence on the English people who bear the characteristic of open-mindedness and try to be rational, analytic and positive.

CONCLUSION

With the deepening of China's reform and opening up as well as the acceleration of global integration, there has been a conspicuous increase in the number of loanwords that have found their way into Chinese. The universal access to Internet has prompted this trend to develop even faster, with foreign words constantly translated or borrowed by Chinese to fill the lexical gap and improve language diversity. People have become more and more focused on language ecology in the 21st century, when ecolinguistics has become an independent language subject. Keeping the abundance and diversity of language is as important as keeping natural ecological balance.

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