

Loanword: Mirror of Social Contact

Wei Zhan

College of English, Zhejiang Yuexiu University of Foreign Languages, Shaoxing, China

Email: 343415984@qq.com

How to cite this paper: Zhan, W. (2023).

Loanword: Mirror of Social Contact. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 11, 274-283.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2023.1111018>

Received: November 6, 2023

Accepted: November 21, 2023

Published: November 24, 2023

Copyright © 2023 by author(s) and
Scientific Research Publishing Inc.

This work is licensed under the Creative
Commons Attribution International
License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

As an essential reflection of language contacts, the loanword is not only an important way of metabolizing vocabulary, but also a crucial approach to the creation and evolution of language and culture. This article does a detailed study of the loanword by observing the borrowing climaxes, analyzing the motivations for borrowing and assessing the values of borrowing in English. Through exemplification and comparison, the writer focuses on illustrating why the loanword is the mirror of social activities, unequal social status and people's ideology which includes openness, compatibility and laziness. All these factors are reflected by the loanword and in turn stimulate and promote the process of borrowing. By exploring the loanword in English profoundly, we should develop a proper attitude toward the foreign cultures, objecting the so-called absolute refusal for the sake of Sinicism or the passive acceptance in the guise of globalization.

Keywords

Loanword, Mirror, Social Activities, Social Status, Ideology

1. Introduction

Language is a fundamental component of human communication and cultural exchange. Throughout history, social contacts and cultural exchange have played a crucial role in shaping the development of languages around the world. Linguistic contacts, which occur when speakers of different languages come into contact with each other, inevitably lead to linguistic borrowing, whereby words and phrases from one language are adopted into another. For example, trade and commerce, migration, war and conquest, as well as technology and media have played a significant role in fostering linguistic contacts and facilitating the borrowing of words across linguistic boundaries. As a language evolves, it naturally undergoes changes in vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. So the appearance of loanwords can be seen as evidence of the cultural and linguistic influ-

ences that have shaped a language over time. And the consequences of linguistic borrowing are far-reaching, affecting not only language itself, but also the broader cultural and social contexts in which it is used. In English, more than 80% of its vocabulary are loanwords, most of which seem to be native words. The English vocabulary has always replenished itself by continually taking over words from other languages over centuries. As what the American linguist Sapir (1921) once noted, “The simplest kind of influence that one language may exert on another is the ‘borrowing’ of words.” Synchronically, each language, due to its specific living conditions, social system, historical evolution, molds of thinking and behaviors, customs and conventions, will hold its own characteristics. Thus cross-cultural exchange gives rise to lexical interdependence. Diachronically, the ever-emerging of new objects and ideas in different community need badly more lexical creation, importation and exportation.

The study of loanwords in Western world could be dated back to the 1920s when Bloomfield (1914) first divided borrowings into intimate borrowings and culture borrowings in his *An Introduction to the Study of Language*. Later, Haugen and Weinreich Garland Cannon made great contribution to the study of loanwords. The latest influential theory is Ghil’ad Zuckerman’s Folk-Etymological Nativization. To sum up, almost scholars in every time has made the great contribution to the study.

In China, “borrowing” is only a slight touch in many books, dictionaries or monographs which specialized in language studies. Luo Changpei, Gao Mingkai and Ji Xianling are imitators. Some workers had made their contributions to inspire more deliberation in this field, to name a few, Wang Rongpei, Shi Youwei, Xiong Wenhua. In 2001, a comprehensive study of language contact and borrowing of English and Chinese has been made in the book titled *Language Contact and Lexical Borrowing of English and Chinese* by Hu Zhaoyun. Also, through a survey on the articles on Shandong Language Teaching, there are quite a few theses about loanwords, most of which involve the cross-culture functions of loanwords and extra-message on the translation of loanwords. However, few of them gain insights of culture and speakers’ ideology from the point of loanwords. So, to write this article means that the writer takes the challenge to follow those preceding footsteps and get some insights about society and culture from the perspective of loanwords.

2. The Definition of Loanword and Two Kinds of Borrowing

2.1. The Definition of Loanword

Whenever and wherever there is culture contact, it is necessary to utilize words from other languages to refer to new things, organizations, or the ways of behavior and thinking, for words or phrases were not available or convenient in one language. They are known as loanwords and their acquisition by the target language is traditionally called borrowing. According to Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, “loanword” can be defined in ways such as “a word taken

from another language and at last partly naturalized”, or “a word taken into one language from another” according to Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English. Through history, there are arguments over the definition of loanword. Some linguists suggest that the term should be used only to refer to phonetic loans while some would rather conclude that borrowings mean both phonetic loans and translated loans. The writer agrees with the inference that all imported words for new objects, ideas and experience can be named “loanword”, “borrowed word” or “borrowings”.

2.2. The Definition of Culture and Intimate Borrowing

Bloomfield (1914) divided borrowings into intimate borrowings and culture borrowings. Culture borrowing is usually mutual, which means that every speech community learns from each other, that is to say, all languages involved are equal and have the same chance to lend to, or borrow from other languages, regardless of the cultural intimacy and topographical closeness between or among the languages. The borrowings that are born with the spread of religion or thoughts are of this case. Intimate borrowing is kind of borrowing which occurs when two languages are spoken in what is topographically and politically a single community. As Bloomfield (1933) notes in *Language*, “The borrowing goes predominantly from upper language to the lower ones, and it very often extends to a speech forms that are not connected with cultural novelties.” In such a case, the upper language is spoken by the dominant and privileged group and the speakers of lower language are driven to use the upper language by different kinds of pressure.

3. Analysis of Borrowings in English

3.1. The Surges of Borrowings in English

Durkin (2014) points out that the rich variety of the English vocabulary reflects the vast number of words it has taken from other languages, ranging from Latin, Greek, Scandinavian, Celtic, French, Italian, Spanish, and Russian to, among others, Hebrew, Maori, Malay, Chinese, Hindi, Japanese. The borrowing enthusiasm of a language may be quite different from time to time. A language in different times may borrow words from different sources and on different scales. In a certain time, the borrowing may be on a fast speed, a wide range and a large scale and therefore, forms a borrowing climax. There are several borrowing surges in English (Hu, 2001).

1) The period of the introduction of Christianity

The English of this period is old English. And it borrowed many words related to religion from Latin, such as *angel, devil, bishop, monk, minister, church, disciple, priest, candle, deacon*, etc. Roman’s invasion of England left a solid foundation of religion. The borrowing of this case is culture borrowing, for it is closely related with the spread of religion, that is, Christianity. The words borrowed in this period about religion are still in popular use today.

2) The period of occupation by the Scandinavians

The Old English from late 8th century also adopted a surprising number of words from Scandinavia languages, many of which have come to the basic vocabulary of English, such as *ball, race, gap, root, seat, happy, wrong, call, ugly, tight, sky, happen*, etc. This is the direct result of continual invasions by the Scandinavians. During this period, the intercourse of two countries is intimate. Consequently, English borrowed a lot of words from invaders and naturally borrowing of this time is intimate borrowing.

3) The period of Norman Conquest

This period is from the early 11th century to the middle 14th century in which the vocabulary of English was hugely influenced by French and adopted 9000 words of French origin, an estimated 75% which are still in use today (Hu, 2001). Words like *cuisine, mirage, tour, voyage, ballet, rouge, elite, souvenir, palette, valet, uniform*, etc. were adopted at this period. Also, French became the official language widely used in school, politics and literature. This is the definite reason that the vocabulary of English was doubled by the addition of French words.

4) The period of Renaissance

During the time from 14th century to the 16th century, the early Modern English borrowed multitude of new words from Latin and Greek since the Renaissance took place. It was a revival of interest in classics that had been ignored in the previous times. Though borrowing of this time is culture borrowing, it is one-sided, for Latin has far more to give than English. Words like *rhetoric, pandemic, Olympian, universal, drama, Majesty, democracy, imperial*, etc. flooded into English in this period, covering science, arts, astronomy and many other domains.

5) The period of colonization

This period dated from the early 17th century to 19th century. With a growth of international trade and the urge to colonize the known world, English made a number of direct adoptions from language spoken outside Europe. Some examples are *sultan* and *ghoul* from Arabic, *litchi* and *typhoon* from Chinese, *shah* and *shoal* from Persian, *yoghurt* from Turkish and *czar* from Russian.

3.2. The Values of Borrowing

3.2.1. Quantitative Change

Borrowing enriches the English language by expanding its vocabulary. As we know, English has the largest vocabulary and the most synonyms of found in no other language around the world. The richness is due to the fact that English has grown over centuries by constantly incorporating words from other languages. Albert (2003) mentions that “The richness of English is largely due to the happy mingling of Latin, French and native elements. It has been said that we have a synonym at each level-popular, literary and learned.” The Latin one is usually somewhat bookish and the French one is often more formal than the native one among the three levels of English synonyms. With such delicate distinction, the

speakers of English are able to pick and choose with a wide range of analogous words of different linguistic origin. For example, a speaker may be in favor of *preface* from French rather than *introduction* from Latin in some contexts. He may also prefer to use *foreword*, an Anglo-Saxon word, to *preface* in other contexts. “Therefore, he is henceforth to express his thought with the greatest precision imaginable, to achieve subtle nuances of shading and sound, meaning and meter” (Hu, 2001).

3.2.2. Semantic Change

Extensive borrowing lexically and morphologically also brings about the semantic change in the language. When a language borrows words and morphemes from another language, it often leads to semantic change. This is because words and morphemes from different languages often have different meanings, connotations, and cultural association. For example, the English word “table” originally meant a flat piece of wood or stone, but when it was borrowed from French, it came to mean a piece of furniture of a flat surface with one or more legs. The word “sushi” is a borrowed word from Japanese, which originally referred to a type of fermented fish. However, in English, the word has taken on a broader rice and seafood. In this case, the word “sushi” has undergone a semantic shift from its original meaning to a more general one. Morphological borrowing also leads to semantic changes in English. For example, the English language has borrowed the prefix “un-” from Latin, which is used to indicate negation or reversal. This prefix has been added to many English words to indicate negative or reversed meaning, such as “unhappy”, “unfriendly” etc.

3.2.3. Stylistic Change

Borrowing also provides English speakers an access to new ways of expressing themselves. During the Renaissance, which occurred in Europe between the 14th to 17th centuries, there was a renewed interest in classical knowledge and learning. This led to an increased borrowing of words from Latin and Greek, which were considered prestigious and sophisticated languages at the time. As English borrowed more words from them, it allowed writers to create new words that sounded more elevated and formal than existing English vocabulary. For example, the English word “philosophy” comes from the Greek word “philosophia” which means “love of wisdom.” The use of this word in English conveys a sense of intellectualism and depth that may not have been present with English words at the time. Another example is the use of some borrowed words from French. When English speakers use French-origin words like “restaurant”, “menu” and “chef”, they are often associated with a higher level of formality or sophistication. These all show the stylistic change brought by the borrowing of words.

4. The Mirror of Society and Culture

4.1. The Mirror of England’s Invasion History and Social Activity

From the description of the borrowing climax in English, it can be concluded

that the development of borrowing coincides with the history. As is known to all, England had gone through the invasions of the Rome, the Vikings, the Anglo-Saxons and the expansion of the world trade and colonization. The borrowing also reached its climaxes in the correspondent periods. It is not accidental but evitable. Born with the social contact, and flowered with the cultural communication, loanwords carry a lot of cultural information and bear the marks of historical events. Admittedly, borrowed words become the witness of social contacts and cultural exchange (Ye & Xu, 2013). Dylewsk (2019) argues that loanwords play an important role in the development and evolution of language. They allow for the expression of new ideas and concepts, and they can also reflect cultural and social changes. Therefore, loanwords are bestowed with great values in the study of the evolution of language itself and intercourse among different language communities. What's more, the larger and closer the contacts last, the deeper influences the involved language exert on each other. It can be seen clearly from the fact that Chinese directly borrow more loanwords from English rather than through the way of Japanese as before. Meanwhile, more Chinese words are adopted into English, such as *yin*, *yang* and so on.

Qiu & Bai (2006) point out that borrowing is a way to study, to imitate and even to invent. The first borrowed words on Christianity makes a great contribution to the vocabulary of English, but a more significant thing is people's conversion of their religious outlook from the previous Teutonic one to Catholicism. With the influx of words of Latin and Greek origin into English during the time of the renaissance, there also arouse a fashion to ornamenting one's discourse with what were then called "aureate" terms drawn from Greek and Latin. Also, English borrowed the word "tea" from Chinese and borrowed tea culture of China at the same time. For a long time, having a cup of tea after 3'o clock is quite popular in England. In recent years, with the adoption of Chinese words *taiji* and *kung-fu* into English, the enthusiasm for the martial arts of Chinese swept many places in America. Therefore, the real meaning of borrowing is to provide people with more opportunities to communicate, to study from each other and enhance the human beings altogether.

4.2. The Reflections of the States of Culture

As we mentioned above, intimate borrowing is usually one-sided borrowing. The borrowing of this type may show a superiority of the source language.

Large-scale borrowing of English from French attributes to the powerful military dominance of France over England. At that time, those masters simply used their own language as the tool of communication, so people in England had to adopt a great number of French words to maintain good communication. In this case, the upper language, French was introduced by a body of conquerors who dominated in various parts of social life for about 300 years. Consequently, a large number of French words crowded into English.

Latin is also the key source of English's borrowed words. The reason why

English borrows greatly from Latin is that Latin has long been considered to be an elegant and prestigious language developing from brilliant cultural backgrounds. During the Renaissance, the classical elements, namely, Latin and Greek elements, were borrowed, for example, *philosophy, electron, drama, tragedy, zoology, biology* from Greek and *communism, class, constitution, republic, socialism, dictatorship* from Latin. Actually, all these words are used in most languages of Indo-European family with nearly the same form in different languages with slight difference in phonetics, morphology and syntax. Many of them are even used in many other languages other than those of the Indo-European families. Even today, it should be observed that English has created many words out of Latin and Greek elements, especially in the field of science and technology, such as *antibiotic, astronaut, auto-visual, autolysis*, etc.

4.3. The Reflections of People's Ideology

Each language has its own characters which can be reflected in grammar, phonology, morphology, semantics, syntax and other internal structures. As a result of this, different languages may be bestowed with varied borrowing capability, diversified degree of openness to borrowing. The following part illustrates how loanwords reflect speakers' ideology, e.g. openness, conformity, laziness.

4.3.1. Openness

Most English speakers hold that if a form of foreign origin is beneficial, it should be put to work no matter what its parentage is. As Foster (1968) states that "The English language has always been hospitable to the words from other tongues... that English is more than usually open to foreign influence as compared with other languages." So English is capable to adopt expressions from foreign language and set them to work with a minimum of confusion. At the very beginning, English borrowed masses from Scandinavia and French despite its inferior position. Nowadays, as the most universal language in the world, English still adopt words from other language with its comparatively superior status.

A case can also show speakers' openness of English. During the social communication, the words concerning materials are easy to be borrowed while the words connected with beliefs and religions are difficult. However, English borrowed a lot of religious words from Latin at the very beginning. Soon these words came into the daily use and are still frequently used today.

4.3.2. Compatibility

Though many words in English are loanwords, most of them have been assimilated into English and become part and parcel of the English language and are hardly recognized as foreign words. Nevertheless, there are some words that keep their original characters.

Older and frequently used loanwords are well incorporated with English so that they seem to be the native ones. This is true with the first period of Latin borrowings, e.g. *cheese, street, wall, wine*, and with Scandinavia loanwords, such

as frequent used nouns (*husband, fellow, gate, root, etc.*) and verbs (*call, die, take, etc.*). Numerous French words, such as *air, age cry, chair, city, crime, dear*, are thoroughly assimilated into the vocabulary of English and have become an integral part of the language. So the speakers of English are capable to accommodate the borrowed culture and make them associated with the already existing native ones.

Sometimes, the speakers of English also have to conform to the original characters of loanwords due to various reasons. First, they may conform to the prestigious languages. Words from Latin, Greek and French in English have formed their own morphological systems. So the borrowing words from these languages usually maintain their original forms even they sometimes violate the rules of English, such as the plural forms of *data, crises, strata, oases* and so on. Second, they may conform to the desire to display the cultural information associated with the source languages. This is quite true with the culture-specific words, like *litchi, kowtow* from Chinese, and *letters patent* and *attorney general* from French. Besides, they may also conform to the foreign language for the sake of unity. There is a very interesting phenomenon in English, while the name of several animals in their lifetime is the native words of English: *ox, cow, calf, sheep, swine, boar, deer*, their flesh appear on the table with French names: *beef, veal, mutton, pork, bacon, brawn, venison*. The native English are the servants who work for the invaders while the Normans are masters who enjoy the products of the laborers. So they gave up the native names in favor of the French ones merely because they had to conform themselves to their masters so as to be keeping with the close and long-standing contact with rulers.

4.3.3. Laziness

From another perspective, English's large-scale borrowing also reflects people's linguistic laziness to some extent. For the speakers of English, it is true they will borrow words rather than invent new words to express a new idea or an unexpected object as long as there are ready-made words from other languages. In English, such kind of laziness is fully demonstrated by preference for words from the classical languages, that is, Latin and Greek. English has adopted a lot of words on science and technology and political nomenclature. Even today, it tends to use the morphemes in Latin and Greek to coin words for the newly-emerging things in the field of science and technology. "This is shown by the case in which new terms actually are framed whenever the need for them is really felt, especially by uneducated people who are not tempted to go outside their own language to express their thoughts" (Otto, 1982).

Such laziness is the main reason for continually finding shorter, simpler ways to get things done with a shorter time and less effort. Laziness usually can help achieve the most by doing the minimum. The speakers of English enrich the size and diversity of their vocabulary by the simplest way of borrowing the ready-made words with an appropriate change. There is no doubt they optimize the foreign things to flourish themselves. We should learn a lesson from this case, that is, we

should not merely accept everything that is presented to us or just worry and refuse the imported things but actively make full use of them. We can be lazy in body but active in thinking.

5. Conclusion

Borrowing is necessary and inevitable, as Sapir (1921) points out that “Languages, like culture, are rarely sufficient unto themselves.” English has always replenished itself by adopting words from different source languages. Continuous borrowing enriches the borrowing language and endows it with remarkable diversity and versatility.

In the regard of loanword, some people in China raise the question of the “purity” of language while some are afraid of the invasion of the prestigious languages. And they argue that Chinese does not belong to the Indo-European family. So does Japanese. However, English has borrowed far more words from Japanese than from Chinese, such as those household names, *Honda*, *Toyota*, *Sony*, *Hitachi*, *NEC*, *Mitsubishi*, *judo*, *kimono* and so on. In this sense, language is closely related with national strength. Another case is that “taikonaut” from Chinese is adopted by English immediately after China’s first successful launch of man-carried spaceship. As Zhang & Wang (2020) state that Chinese loanwords have an increasing influence on the English language, which is closely related to the process of globalization. Li & Chen (2023) also argue that though Chinese loanwords in English have certain pragmatic features, such as being used in specific contexts or to express certain cultural concepts, the use of Chinese loanwords in English has become a popular trend, reflecting the exchange and integration of Chinese and Western cultures. Thus, when confronted with more and more borrowing words, we should not worry about the so-called “language invasion” or refuse absolutely. On the one hand, we should be open and broad-minded enough as the speakers of English to accommodate these foreign things to flourish our own culture. On the other hand, we should preserve and enhance our culture heritages so that Chinese can also become one of the key sources of borrowing.

Based on the analysis and discussion, it can be concluded that loanwords serve as a mirror of social contact between different cultures and languages. The borrowing of words from one language to another reflects the extent and nature of cultural and linguistic exchange, as well as the social and historical relationship between the borrowing and lending cultures. This implies that the study of loanwords can provide valuable insights into cultural and social dynamics of different societies and their interaction with one another. By exploring loanwords, we have gained a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances of intercultural communication and the ways in which language reflects and shapes our social world.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- Albert, C. B. (2003). *A History of the English Language*. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Bloomfield, L. (1914). *An Introduction to the Study of Language*. G. Bell and Sons.
- Bloomfield, L. (1933). *Language*. Henry Holt.
- Durkin, P. (2014). *Borrowed Words: A History of Loanwords in English*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199574995.001.0001>
- Dylewski, R. (2019). *Loanwords in English: A Corpus-Based Study of Lexical Borrowing*. Peter Lang A G, International Academic Publishers.
- Foster, B. (1968). *The Changing in English Language*. Penguin Books Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-05942-3>
- Hu, Z. (2001). *Language Contact and Lexical Borrowing of English and Chinese*. Shandong University Press.
- Li, M., & Chen, H. (2023). A Study of the Semantic and Pragmatic Features of Chinese Loanwords in English. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 159, 23-34.
- Otto, J. (1982). *Growth and Structure of the English Language*. Basil Blackwell.
- Qiu, R., & Bai, L. (2006). An Analysis of the Social Function of Loanwords in Cross-Cultural Communication. *Journal of Tianjin Foreign Studies University*, 3, 17-20.
- Sapir, E. (1921). *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech*. Harcourt, Brace and Company.
- Ye, F., & Xu, T. (2013). *Outline of Linguistics*. Peking University Press.
- Zhang, Y., & Wang, Y. (2020). Chinese Loanwords in English: A Corpus-Based Study. *Journal of Foreign Languages and Cultures*, 4, 38-49.