

PAPER 7 (HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS)

What are the conditions or mechanisms for borrowing?

Whenever two dialects come into contact, one or both may be modified. In face to face communication, either speaker may imitate some feature of the other's speech; when the contact is indirect, as in reading, the influence can of course pass in one direction. The feature which is imitated is called 'model'; the idiolect (or language) which acquires something new in the process is the 'borrowing idiolect' (or language). The process itself is called 'borrowing', which is one of the important mechanisms of phylogenetic change. Any of the mechanisms can bring about an innovation, but if the innovation survives and spreads to other speakers, only borrowing is responsible. It is, therefore, especially important for us to understand the conditions under which borrowing is likely to occur.

CONDITIONS FOR BORROWING

The mere contact of two dialects A and B does not guarantee that one will borrow from the other. For a borrowing to occur, say from B to A, two conditions must be met:

1. The speaker of A must understand, or think he understands, the particular utterance idiolect B which contains the model.
2. The speaker of A must have some motive, overt or covert, for the borrowing.

The first condition need not detain us long. Our reference must be to apparent rather than genuine understanding. An amusing example is the following. In the Philippines the names of saints are often bestowed on infants. After world war II, one child was named Ababis, supposedly the name of the patron saint of the United States. The child's father had repeatedly heard American soldiers, in moments of emotional stress, call on this saint: San Ababis!

The second is more difficult. We cannot profit from idle speculation about the psychology of borrowers, but must confine ourselves to such overt evidence as is at hand. This may lead us to miss some motives of importance, but we can be much surer of those which we do discern. These are two in number: 'prestige' and 'need filling'.

1. The prestige motive: People emulate those whom they admire, in speech pattern as well as in other respects. European immigrants to the United States introduce many English expressions into their speech, partly for other reasons, but partly because English is the important language of the country. Upper and middle class English men, in the days after the Norman conquest, learned French expressions in their English because French was the language of the new rulers of the country. Bobby-sixers imitate, in one way or another, the latest and most popular radio or TV singer.

Sometimes the motive is somewhat different: the imitator does not necessarily admire those whom he imitates, but wishes to be identified with them and thus be treated as they are. The results are not distinguishable, and we can leave to psychologists the sorting out of fine shades of difference.

However, there is one negative variety of prestige which must not be overlooked: that of conformity with the majority. Naturally, this is more operative under some social conditions than other. A child moved at an early school age from one part of the United States to another changes his style of English in the direction of that of his new age-mates in school and playground. This is not necessarily through direct imitation of some single

outstanding playmate, but simply because it is discomfoting to be in the minority. Here, as often, different prestige models may disagree. The child's parents and teachers probably say "John and I are going", while the predominant usage of the child's age-mates is "Me and John are going". For a time, at least, the drive for conformity within the age group is apt to take precedence.

The prestige motive is constantly operative in dialect borrowing, it becomes important in language borrowing only under special conditions. When speakers of two different languages live intermingled in a single region, usually one of the languages is that spoken by those in power: this is the 'upper' or 'dominant' language, and the other is the 'lower'. Such a state of affair has most often be brought about by invasion and conquest, more rarely by peaceful migration. In the long run one or the other language may disappear, but the factors which determine which will survive seem to be so subtle and complex as to escape accurate observation., In the meantime, however, the prestige factor leads to extensive borrowing from "the dominant language into the lower". Borrowing in the other direction is much more limited and largely ascribable to the other principle motive.

2. The need filling motive: The most obvious other motive for borrowing is to fill a gap in the borrowing idiolect.

New experiences, new objects and practices, bring new words into a language. It does not matter whether the new objects and practices come to the community, by way of what anthropologists call 'diffusion', or the community goes to the new objects and practices, by way of migration; the result is the same. 'Tea', 'coffee', 'tobacco', 'sugar', 'cocoa', 'chocolate', 'tomato', have spread all over the world in recent times, along with the objects to which the words refer. 'Typhoons' and 'monsoons' have not spread, but direct or indirect experience with them has.

Among the new things which migrants or conquerors encounter are natural and artificial topographical features, and place names are often passed down from the earlier inhabitants of a region to later arrivals. Slavic place names in Eastern Germany, such as Berlin, Leipzig, Dresden, Breslau, attest the earlier presence of Slavic speaking people in that region. Vienna, Paris, and London are of Celtic origin. Schuykill, Catskill, Harlem, The Bowery were taken from Dutch into English when New Amsterdam became New York. Michigan (big lake), Wisconsin (where it is cold), Chicago (skunk weed), Illinois (man), Oshkosh (claw), Mississippi (big river) and many others are Algonquian; these were names of lakes, rivers and Indian settlements before they became by transfer the names of cities and states.

Immigrants to the United States in the last seventy five years have drawn heavily on English for new words, partly on the prestige basis and partly for need filling purposes: the two motives must often be mingled, and we cannot always say which was more important in a given instance. In exchange, however, American English has acquired a sparse scattering of need filling loans from the various languages of the immigrants: 'delicatessen', 'hamburger', 'wiener', 'zwieback', from immigrant German, 'chile con carne', 'tortilla', from Mexican Spanish, 'spaghetti', 'ravidi', 'pizza', 'grinder' (sandwich) from Italian (the last perhaps from grande 'bigone'), 'chow mein', 'chop suey', from Chinese - to stick to the sphere of humble foodstuffs. More elevated loans from these languages have usually entered English via other routes: the immigrants are not

responsible for *Zeitgeist*, *Weltanschauung* (German, philosophy), *allegro*, *andante*, *sonata*, *piccolo* (Italian music), *demi-plie*, *grand plie*, *barre*, *arabesque* (French ballet).

Our examples of borrowing under the need filling motive have been of borrowing from one language to another. But the same variety of borrowing takes place constantly among the dialects of a single language. Expressions like *corn pone*, *corn bread*, *spoon bread* are known wherever the types of food are prepared, but seem to have got their start in the south.

If a local dialect gains ascendancy for political and economic reasons, then one expects extensive borrowing from that dialect for prestige reasons, but forms borrowed into the ascendant dialect have to be explained - and usually, if the records are not too scanty, explanation on the need filling basis is possible. When the ascendant ME of London imported the words *vat*, *vixen*, and perhaps *vane* (as in *weather vane*) from the local dialects of south and east, it was borrowing words that occurred mainly in culture contexts of little importance in city life. The words may have been carried to London by *kentish* tradesmen who settled in the city, or, at least in the case of *vixen* and perhaps in that of *vane*, might have been picked up by London aristocrats while on hunts in the south.