

CHAPTER 3

LOANWORDS AND LANGUAGE CHANGE

The third chapter of the dissertation deals with the theory of ‘Loanwords/borrowing.’ As mentioned in the previous chapters language change is divided into internal and external change. Here, we shall deal only with external change which is borrowing/loanwords. In this effort I have used Edward Sapir’s theory to better explicate the cause of language change through borrowing. In this chapter I attempt to discuss some of the theories as well as the reasons behind use of ‘loanwords.’ This chapter explains the meaning of ‘Loanwords,’ the circumstances that lead a linguistic community to adopt such a practice and how it positively and negatively influences a linguistic community. The second part of the chapter exclusively deals with Edward Sapir’s theory of ‘Loanwords/borrowing.’

3.1 The Concept of ‘Borrowing’/Loan

Most linguists use the term ‘Borrowing/loan’ interchangeably. In this chapter I too use these terms interchangeably. It is said that of all linguistic elements, ‘meaning’ is probably the least resistant to change. In other words meaning keeps changing over a period of time in a language. There is a popular proverb in Indian villages which says that ‘language changes every six miles’ (Varshney 274). One of the results is that all grammars leak because language is not a static entity. In fact a popular definition of language describes it thus, ‘language is modifiable, extendable and that language changes in time and space’ (Varshney 274).

Living languages or the language that is in use are never stagnant or permanent. They continually change their sounds, their grammar, their vocabulary and their meaning for various reasons. A look at the old inscriptions and manuscripts of Chaucer or Shakespeare shows how many of the English sounds and spellings have changed over the years. For instance, the final 'e' in numerous Chaucerian words is no more seen in modern English. The sound 'j' which occurs before 'u' in words such as tune, duty, use has disappeared in words such as rute, flute etc. 'k' sound in Hindi words such as *varkha* (meaning 'rain') has been replaced by changing *varkha* into *varsha*. Earlier *roti*, *dal*, *atma* etc., were not included in an English dictionary as they are today. Hindi once had no terms such as Radio, Television, Train, Signal etc., (Varshney 274). Thus, we see the phenomenon of language change everywhere. It is the reality of language, a characteristic trait of every existing language on the planet.

The above discussed changes in a language are gradual, systematic and minor. They seem so natural that they escape our attention as they occur and remain imperceptible. Over the span of centuries, however, their cumulative effect is noticeable (Varshney 274). The most astonishing aspect about language is not the fact that it changes but that it changes so little as not to disturb its equilibrium or to upset its basic characteristics. Languages change in an orderly and integrated fashion. No sound change happens as an isolated incident. Language constantly self-regulates and re-adjusts itself in an attempt to maintain an equilibrium (Varshney 274).

When any part of the structure of a language is changed by importation of features, whether from some other part of the language or from some external source the imported features are said to be borrowed. 'External borrowings' could imply those from

one dialect to another (dialectal borrowings), those from an earlier stage of the same language (archaisms), and those from other languages (loans). It is very frequent for a language to borrow lexical items from related dialects (regional, social, occupational) for various reasons. Borrowing is a very common linguistic phenomenon. In all probability, no language is completely free of borrowed forms. Languages change through the influence of other languages. Some languages borrow too largely, others only to a limited extent (Varshney 290; Sharma 132-135).

Another aspect of 'borrowing' is the Semantic aspect of it. Semantic borrowing is more elusive, and more difficult to trace, for example, the semantic influence of Judeo-Christianity on Greek. The lexical form of angel is derived from Greek 'aggelos,' but the concept itself is borrowed from Hebrew. Semantic borrowing is a process virtually impossible to forestall. Usually it occurs in one of the two forms: either meaning of an existing word is changed and the new meaning replaces the old one completely, or the old meaning continues to exist alongside the new meaning. For example of the second type, we can take the word 'red' which has become synonymous with socialist and the especially communist since the Russian Revolution. Normally 'Traumatic' used to refer to physical wounding or shock but this meaning has been superseded by a 'disturbing experience affecting the mind.' In British English 'snag' meant a 'trunk' or 'large branch of a tree embedded in the bottom of a river' until the meaning 'obstacle' was borrowed from American English which eventually eclipsed the earlier meaning altogether (Varshney 291; Sharma 132-135).

Semantic borrowing happens frequently where there are intimate connections between two languages. This happened for instance in the early Christian Church where

Hebrew exercised a powerful influence on Greek and later on Greek in turn influenced Latin in a big way. It is now happening in the language of sports which in many countries is saturated with Anglicanism (Varshney 291). Most languages do not have appropriate words for sports related items, thus, English words are used freely and extensively when it comes to sports items and events.

3.2 Edward Sapir's Theory of Language Change through Borrowing

According to Edward Sapir (1884-1939), one of the foremost American linguists and anthropologists of his time, "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" (Sapir 93). The intercourse between these languages could either be friendly or hostile, it may move on the humdrum plane of business and trade relations or it may consist of a borrowing or interchange of spiritual goods like art, science, religion. It is very difficult to point to a completely isolated language or dialect (Sapir 93). He says, "Language moves down time in a current of its own making. It has a drift... nothing is perfectly static. Every word, every grammatical element, every locution, every sound and accent is a slowly changing configuration, molded by the invisible and impersonal..." (Sapir 150). Sometimes there are cases of inter-marriages, inter-tribal trade, and general cultural interchanges among primitive tribes. Whatever the degree or nature of contact between neighboring peoples it is generally sufficient to lead to some kind of linguistic inter-influencing (Sapir 93).

Often the influence of language runs heavily in one direction that is one is the model language and other is the borrower. The language of a group that is looked upon as a center of culture is naturally far more likely to exert an appreciable influence on other languages spoken in its vicinity than to be influenced by them. For instance Chinese language has flooded the vocabularies of Korean, Japanese and others for centuries but has received nothing in return. In the Western Europe of medieval and modern times French has exercised a similar though probably a less overwhelming influence. English borrowed an immense number of words from the French of the Norman invaders. But English has exerted practically no influence on French. The simplest kind of influence that one language may exert on another is the “borrowing” of words. When there is cultural borrowing there is always the likelihood that the associated words may be borrowed too. And so the process has continued uninterruptedly down to the present day, each cultural wave bringing to the language a new deposit of ‘loanwords’ (Sapir 93).

The careful study of such ‘loan-words’ indicates a great deal on the history of culture. One can almost estimate the role which various people have played in the development and spread of cultural ideas by taking note of the extent to which their vocabularies have filtered into those of other people. When we realize that educated Japanese can hardly frame a single literary sentence without the use of Chinese resources we realize how much the dominant language has influenced these languages (Sapir 93).

We also see for instance that Burmese and Cambodian bear the imprint of Sanskrit and Pali that came in with Hinduism and Buddhism centuries ago. It is said that there are just five languages in the world that have had an over-whelming significance as carriers of culture. They are classical Chinese, Sanskrit, Arabic, Greek and Latin. In

comparison to these even the so called 'culturally important' languages as Hebrew and French sink into a secondary position (Sapir 93). The fact is that inter-influence of languages on each other depends very much on how intimate the relations are between one linguistic community and another (Sapir 94).

If we analyze Cambodian and Tibetan reaction to Sanskrit influence we see two different reactions. Cambodians welcomed immense numbers of Sanskrit 'loan words,' many of which are in common use even today there was no psychological resistance to them. Classical Tibetan literature was a slavish adaptation of Hindu Buddhist literature and nowhere has Buddhism implanted itself more firmly than in Tibet yet it is strange how only a few Sanskrit words have found their way into the language (Sapir 94). Tibetans were highly resistant to the polysyllabic words of Sanskrit because they could not automatically fall into significant syllables as they should have in order to satisfy the Tibetan feeling for form. Tibetans were therefore driven to translate the great majority of these Sanskrit words into native equivalents. The Tibetan craving for form was satisfied though the literally translated foreign terms must often have done violence to genuine Tibetan idioms. In the case of Tibetans even the proper names of the Sanskrit originals were carefully translated (Sapir 94).

The study of how a language reacts to the presence of foreign words: rejecting them, translating them or freely accepting them may throw much valuable light in its innate formal tendencies. The borrowing of foreign words always entails their phonetic modification. There are sure to be foreign sounds or accentual peculiarities that do not fit the native phonetic habits. They are then so changed as to do as little violence as possible to these habits (Sapir 95). Frequently we have phonetic compromises. For instance an

English word (of French origin) as the recently introduced “camouflage,” as now ordinarily pronounced, corresponds to the typical phonetic usage of neither English nor French (Sapir 95).

Sapir brings to our notice as to how important traits of morphology are frequently found distributed among widely differing languages within a large area, so widely differing, indeed, that it is customary to consider them genetically unrelated. However, sometimes we may suspect that the resemblance is due to a mere convergence that a similar morphological feature has grown up independently in unrelated languages. Yet certain morphological distributions are too specific in character to be so lightly dismissed. There must be some historical factor to account for them (Sapir 97).

It should never be forgotten that the concept of a “linguistic stock” is never definitive in an exclusive sense. We can only say with reasonable certainty that such and such languages are descended from a common source but we cannot say that such and such other languages are not genetically related. All we can do is to say that the evidence for relationship is not cumulative enough to make the inference of common origin absolutely necessary. May it not be then that many instances of morphological similarity between divergent languages of a restricted area are merely the last vestiges of that language (Sapir 97).

According to Sapir the theory of “borrowing” seems totally inadequate to explain those fundamental features of structure hidden away in the very core of the linguistic complex. We know that myths, religious ideas, types of social organization, industrial devices, and other features of culture may spread from point to point, gradually making

themselves at home in cultures to which they were once an alien. We also know that words may be diffused no less freely than cultural elements; that sound also may be “borrowed,” and that even morphological elements may be taken over (Sapir 98).

We may go further and recognize that certain languages have in all probability taken on structural features owing to the suggestive influence of neighboring languages. An examination of such cases however, almost invariably reveals the significant fact that they are but superficial additions on the morphological kernel of the language. On the whole therefore, we shall ascribe the major concordances and divergences in linguistic form, phonetic pattern and morphology to the ‘autonomous drift of language,’ not to the complicating effect of single, diffused features that cluster now this way now that (Sapir 98). According to Sapir Language is probably the most self-contained, the most massively resistant of all social phenomena. It is easier to kill it off than to disintegrate its individual form (98).

3.3 Reasons for Borrowing of Words

It is extremely important to understand the conditions under which borrowing of words from one language to another happens. It is said whenever two idiolects come into contact with each other one or both may be modified. The feature which is imitated is called the ‘model’ the idiolect/language in which the model occurs (or the speaker of that idiolect/language) is called the donor and the idiolect or language which acquires something new in the process is the borrowing idiolect/language. This process is called ‘borrowing’ however, this term requires certain caution in usage because that which is

borrowed does not have to be paid back and the donor does not make any sacrifice and does not have to be asked for permission. The donor goes on speaking as before and only the borrower's speech is altered (Hockett 402; Sapir 98; Bloomfield 461-475).

When two languages come in contact with each other the possibility of 'borrowing' to happen depends on several factors. If the two idiolects/languages are very similar borrowing is very unlikely because the speakers of these languages are totally unknown to each other. On the other hand if both the idiolects are so divergent that the speakers cannot understand each other borrowing is equally unlikely. Between the two extremes we find the situations in which borrowing is more probable. In practice these situations can be classed roughly into two types. In the first case the possibility is of dialect borrowing and in the second case we can speak of language borrowing (Hockett 402; Bloomfield 461-475).

In the following section we shall discuss some of the important reasons behind borrowing of Words from one language to another.

3.3.1 Due to Necessity and Fashion

The creation of new lexical items is partly because of necessity and partly because of fashion. Necessity arises when a word is lost due to certain linguistic reasons, such as attritionⁱ or homonymic clash.ⁱⁱ Obviously a new one must take its place in such a situation. Similarly, if the meaning of a word is devalued another one must be put in the gap left by the devalued one. And new inventions such as 'radar,' 'laser' and 'penicillin' require new words. But at other times new words arise purely through fashion. New

words spring up alongside older words. At first, these new alternatives may be regarded as slang, but in the course of time many of them become increasingly common. The continual infiltration of new lexical items is a normal and healthy trend. It testifies to the essential productivity of language that is the ability to say new things and deal with new situations (Varshney 289; Wikipedia contributors).

Borrowing is never a linguistic necessity, since it is always possible to extend and modify the use of existing lexical items to meet new communication needs. A common cause of lexical borrowing is the need to find words for objects, concepts, and places. It is easier to borrow an existing term from another language than to make one up. This is one of the basic reasons why Bodos as linguistic community has borrowed many from English. The paths of lexical borrowing reflect to a certain extent the paths of cultural influence. For example even 'Hindi' has borrowed from English words such as 'Radio,' 'Television,' 'Telephone,' 'Rail,' 'Signal,' 'Platform,' 'Guard,' 'Conductor' etc. Similarly, the influence of Italian in the field of music and art can be observed in usage of Italian words such as, 'opera,' 'tempo,' 'piano,' 'sonnet,' 'fresco,' etc. In the context of Arabic loan words A large portion of the words in English pertain to the realm of science examples of which are: 'zero,' 'cipher,' 'zenith,' 'alchemy,' 'algebra,' 'nadir,' 'alcohol' etc' (Varshney 290-91).

3.3.2 Mass Effect

A single act of borrowing affects in the first instance only the borrowing idiolect/language. This is in itself important for linguistic ontogeny; 'borrowing' is

presumably the most important mechanism by which a language continues to change during adult life. But if such a single act of borrowing were not followed or accompanied by others it could lead to no measurable results in the later history of the language as a whole (Hockett 403). So unless number of people living at a particular period of time in history start using those words the 'loanwords' fail to make any impact on the linguistic community. And the words disappear gradually. Thus, in order that the loan words survive the test of time they should get popularized and generally accepted by a linguistic Community (Hockett 403). Thus, we see that individual borrowing has practically no impact on the linguistic community unless it goes on to have mass effect on such a community.

3.3.3 The Two Conditions for Borrowing

The mere contact of idiolects does not guarantee that one will borrow from the other. For borrowing to occur say from B to A, two conditions must be met: firstly, the speaker of A must understand or think he understands the particular utterance in idiolect B which contains the 'model,' and secondly, the speaker of A must have some motive overt or covert for borrowing (Hockett 403-404). Unless these two conditions exist in two contact idiolects/languages borrowing cannot take place. Not all languages are impacted through borrowing there are certain interactions of languages which do not result in borrowing as well.

3.3.4 The Prestige Motive

People emulate those whom they admire in speech patterns as well as in other respects. For instance, European immigrants to the United States introduce any English expressions into their speech partly for other reasons but partly because English is the important language of the country (Hockett 404). Upper and middle class English men in the days after the Norman conquest learned French and used French expressions in their English because French was the language of the new rulers of the country (Hockett 404).

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. There is one negative variety of prestige which must be discussed that is of conformity with the majority. Naturally this is more operative under some social conditions than others. Let us consider the example of a child who moves at an early school age from one part of the United States to another changes his type of English in the direction of that of his new age-mates in school and playground. This happens because of the discomfoting experience to be a minority. Thus the drive for conformity with age group and social group take precedence (Hockett 403-404).

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 affairs has most often been 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 mean time the prestige factor leads to extensive borrowing from the dominant language into the lower (Hockett 405).

French borrowings can be seen in English religious moral and legal vocabulary a large number of French borrowing is there in English, because in England for a very long time French was the prestige language, and the use of French words in English conversation became a common practice, especially after the Norman Conquest of England in 1066. Latin and Greek had great prestige in the world of scholarship during the middle ages. Consequently Latin and Greek have provided English with the rich resource for borrowing (Varshney 291).

Most of the words borrowed from Latin and Greek and learned if listed such words may run to many thousands. Even the names of many scholarly disciplines are borrowed from the classical language for instance terms such as, ‘Sociology,’ ‘Psychology,’ ‘Anthropology,’ ‘Philosophy,’ ‘Philology’ and ‘Biology’ (Varshney 291). There are many words in English which are formed with Latin morpheme ‘ex’ some of them are: exact, exaggerate, exalt, exclude, explain, explicit, explode, explore, export, extend, extinct, extort etc., similarly, ‘ex-husband’ and ‘ex-wife’ are the examples of Latin ‘ex’ prefixed to Germanic forms. Lexical borrowing in English is sometimes of such complexity that a word may be derived simultaneously from two or more different sources. The word typhoon for example is derived possibly from as many as three different sources: Urdu- Toofan (storm), Greek Typhoon, and Cantonese daal fung (big wind) (Varshney 291).

3.3.5 The Need-Filling Motive

The most obvious other motive for borrowing is to fill a gap in the borrowing idiolect/language. Let us imagine a situation of British sailing vessel in China waters in earliest days of the China trade manned by a mixed crew. A Chinese crewman notices a cloud formation on the horizon and in terror cries out his word for the kind of storm that is approaching. After the storm the English speaking members of the crew are too willing to admit that it is unlike anything in their previous experience and needs its own name; they adopt the Chinese word 'typhoon.' Thus, new experiences, new objects and practices bring new words into a language. It does not matter whether the new object 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 (Hockett 405).

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. 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. In exchange however American English has acquired only a sparse scattering of need filling loans from the various languages of the immigrants (Hockett 405-406).

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 understood as the possible case of ‘need-filling’ (Hockett 405-406).

ⁱ Language attrition is the process of losing a native or first language. This process is generally caused by both isolation from speakers of the first language (L1) and the acquisition and use of a second language (L2), which interferes with the correct production and comprehension of the first.

ⁱⁱ When there is ambiguity between homonyms (whether non-deliberate or contrived, as in riddles and puns), a homonymic clash or conflict is said to have occurred.