

German and French Borrowings in an EFL Context – A Serbian Perspective

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Abstract: This paper looks into the nature, some specificities of interlanguage usage and the phonetic adaptation (or the lack of it) in the area of some recent French and German loanwords and their teaching in a Serbian EFL classroom. It is a commonplace to say that French, German and English have been in intensive contact for many centuries now, but the level and direction of influence have by no means been constant. The two main extralinguistic criteria that trigger the borrowing process, need and prestige, are taken into account, with the aim of deciding to what extent such newer lexical acquisitions have been nativised in contemporary English. The nature of the linguistic contact between French and English, on the one hand, and German and English, on the other, conditions the selection process in which a loanword enters the English lexicon, and an EFL classroom. Lastly, a justification for the teaching of borrowings is provided and some guidelines for their teaching offered, which could easily be implemented in any EFL context.

Key Words: Loanword, borrowing, pronunciation, French, English, German, Serbian EFL learner

Introduction

The linguistic developments of English and French have been intertwined for quite a long time. The intensity of the contact seems to be susceptible to constant changes, but the contact produced many important but also less significant influences, especially in the domain of lexical borrowings. Lexical borrowings are most prone to permeate another language, and they can be seen as mere additions, or rather enrichments to the lexical inventory of the recipient language, depending on the reasons of their introduction into the recipient language. The intermittent linguistic contact between English and French resulted in the expansion of the lexical inventory of English. No matter how dominant English seems to be today, its vocabulary is still growing and many new additions come from across the Channel. According to *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (MWCD, for short), as many as 8,324 entries are still listed as French borrowings, or at least having something to do with French. The corpus extracted from MWCD by an advanced search tool this electronic dictionary has to offer, ranges from very simple vocabulary like *arrive*, *letter* and *vase*, but also contains a number of clichéd phrases like *vers libre*, *premier danseur* and *Nez Percé*. It is important to note that not all entries listed in MWCD as originating from French have a French origin. Many words have the Latin root and in some cases it is unclear how a word found its way into the lexical inventory of English. It should be borne in mind that the number given above is by no means exact, but it still can be used as a starting point and a rough estimate.

Although German and English are both Germanic languages, their linguistic contact is less intense, judging by the number of German borrowings in English. According to MWCD, German lexical additions amount to 2,522 entries, but many lexical items only have vague traces of German, and can be seen as indirect borrowings (especially from Yiddish and also Latin). Still, there is a number of strictly German borrowings present in the corpus, e.g. *Festschrift*, *hausfrau*, *kitsch*, *wunderkind* and *verboten*, but also gastronomic terms like *schnitzel*, *strudel* and *wurst*.

The Nature of the Linguistic Contact

There is virtually no language that has not borrowed words from other languages, and the reasons for lexical importation are manifold. To name just a few, Weinreich's (1953) pioneer study on contact linguistics is used. Some kind of cultural influence may trigger the borrowing process. It may also occur when rare native words are lost and then substituted by borrowings, or when two native words sound so similar that substituting one by a foreign lexical item eliminates possible misunderstandings in a given speech community. One of the roots of lexical borrowing is a constant need for synonyms, especially in those cases where native words have lost their expressive force. By way of adding new lexical items from a foreign language, new, subtle semantic nuances may become possible. Furthermore, a word may be taken over from a low-status language and be used

pejoratively, or quite on the contrary, a word may be taken over from a high-status language and be used to achieve an effect of prestige. Even though lexical borrowing is the most widespread type of borrowing, mainly due to the fact that new lexical acquisitions cannot affect the language system as a whole, languages do not utilize it without limitations. In other words, the speakers of English do not borrow randomly, but when they do import, they do it for a reason. All the situations mentioned above cannot apply to any language contact. Weinreich studied the process of borrowing taking many language communities into account, and an attempt is made here to check his reasons having English as a recipient language, and German and French as donor languages.

Later contact linguistics studies, such as Thomason & Kaufman's (1988: 72-7) hold that the social factor they labelled the "intensity of contact" between the two languages is of great importance for the typology of borrowing. This factor assisted them in proposing a unique borrowing scale that ranges from a very casual contact, on one hand, to a very intense cultural pressure, on the other end of the scale. I will now look into the nature of the linguistic contact between English and French, but also English and German.

The linguistic contacts between English and French in the last two centuries have resulted mostly in lexical borrowing, thus enriching the lexicon of English as the recipient language. This kind of borrowing may be referred to as a casual contact, without any serious consequences to the language system. Borrowings that are introduced into the recipient language do not have a great impact in L2, and there is a minimum of cultural interference associated with them. Furthermore, the intensity of the linguistic contact may change with time, and this is exactly what happened during the development of English and French. These two languages repeatedly borrowed lexemes, and the intensity of contact changed according to the status of the donor language. French seemed to be a dominant language in the Middle English period, but more recently English has offered French many newer lexical acquisitions. Interestingly enough, some loanwords entered the recipient language twice, denoting various concepts. For instance, a recent French loanword *chaise* has the same root (but a completely different lexical status) in contemporary English, if compared to an earlier French loanword *chair*. Similarly, the newer French loanword *pâté* has a ring of prestige to it (this may be due to its unchanged orthography), unlike an earlier cognate that is very common in the lexical inventory of English, *pastry*.

Diachronically, the intensity of contact between French as a donor language, and English as a recipient language, was the strongest in the Middle English period. The linguistic influence of French was so intense in this period that English borrowed two new phonemes, the velar nasal /ŋ/, but also the palate-alveolar fricative /ʒ/. Generally speaking, the importation of phonemes occurs very rarely, and when it has been realized translinguistically it leads linguists to think of the language contact as very powerful. Phonological importation is a sure indicator of a strong interlinguistic influence, even though the donor language may only fill its empty phonological slots, that had previously not been utilized. However, linguistic history has repeated itself and the French language enriched the phonological inventory even in the Modern English period by way of introducing nasalized vowels into English. Wells & Colson (1971: 34) propose a term for such phonological innovations and refer to them as "marginal segments". Such phonemes are used strictly in loanwords from the donor language and do not have a tendency to reach a status a regular native phoneme has. This means that the nasalized French phoneme will probably not be equal to native English phonemes when it comes to the distribution in English – such vowels will retain the positions they have in French loanwords, without a tendency to gain other positions and be employed in the words of Germanic stock, unless used jokingly.

English and German, both belonging to the same family of language, share a large percentage of the lexicon. Words of Germanic origin in these two languages resemble one another in the domain of their phonetic shape, but also in their semantic content. The borrowing hypothesis is that German offers its lexical items pertaining to its cultural heritage, and that the intensity of the contact is not strong.

Most linguists (Weinreich 1953: 79; Bolinger 1968: 90-1; Langacker 1968: 177-79; Van Coetsem 1988: 13; Trask 1994: 12-15; Hock & Joseph 1996: 271; Radford *et al.* 1999: 255) agree that two most important triggering factors of borrowing are "need" and "prestige". When speakers of a language are in need of a lexeme for a new cultural, technological or religious concept, the easiest way to acquire it is by way of borrowing. The English lexemes *typhoon* i *monsoon* (Hockett 1965: 405) entered the English language by way of borrowing. On the other hand, words like *tea*, *coffee*, *tobacco*, *sugar*, *cocoa*, *chocolate* or *tomato* became an indispensable part of the English vocabulary, although they originate from a number of different languages. Prestige brought about many new lexical acquisitions in English. Middle English borrowed *beef*, *veal* and *pork* from the French, and used them alongside with the native items *cow/bull* and *pig*, to signal fine French culinary concepts. French was the language of the Court at the time, and its usage signalled a noble origin.

quality has been approximated to the phonological system of English. The three French nasal vowel /ɔ̃/, ɛ̃, œ̃/ are adapted to /ɔ/, /ɛ/ and /œ/ in English. Selected examples from the corpus illustrate the point:

(4) Fr. /ɔ̃/ → Eng. /ɔ/

fin de siècle /fɛ̃ dɛ sɛ̃kl/

pointe /pɔ̃t/

coq au vin /kɔ̃ o au vɛ̃/

(5) Fr. /œ̃/ → Eng. /œ/

raison d'être /ʁɛ̃zɔ̃ d'œtr/ but also secondary pronunciations of the following words:

Cabernet Sauvignon √ /kɑbɛrɛ̃ sɑvɛ̃ɔ̃/

crouton /kʁu.tɔ̃/

marrons glacés /maʁɔ̃ ɡla.sɛ̃/

montage /mɔ̃taʒ/

nom de plume /nɔ̃ dɛ plum/

piton /pɛ̃.tɔ̃/

wagon-lit /vaʒɔ̃ li.t/

(6) Fr. /œ̃/ → Eng. /œ/

agent provocateur /ãʒɑ̃t pʁɔvɔkœtœr/

arrondissement /aʁɑ̃dɔ̃sɑ̃smɑ̃/

croissant /kʁwãsɑ̃/

debutant /dɛbœtɑ̃/

elan /elɑ̃/

enfant terrible /ɑ̃fɑ̃t tɛrɛbɛl/

idiot savant /idjœt sɑvɑ̃/

pièce de résistance /pjɛs dɛ rɛzistɑ̃s/

séance /sɛɑ̃s/

Judging by examples given in (4)-(6), these loanwords have not undergone the process of assimilation to the full extent. This may be due to their infrequent use or prestigious aura, or the combination of these two factors. The retaining nasality strongly resembles the French pronunciations of the models. Many of the lexemes listed are French phrases, which may be classified as “learned words”. Group (5) brings about a logical conclusion about the unstable phonetic shapes of some loanwords. If a loanword can be pronounced in two different ways, EFL learners are best advised to use the fully assimilated form, e.g. *elan*, *crouton*. At the later stages of EFL acquisition, EFL learners might be taught how to pronounce unassimilated forms.

Lexemes such as *crouton*, *montage*, *croissant*, *debutant*, *elan* and *séance*, among others, are also French loanwords used in Serbian. A plausible assumption is that a Serbian EFL learner will recognize these in English, and be able to deduce the meaning. However, the EFL learners should beware the varying level of frequency of these words in English and Serbian, as recipient languages. *Montage*, for instance, is a noun that can be characterized as highly frequent in Serbian, but not in English. *Séance*, on the other hand, may have specialized meanings in Serbian and English.

German: need and prestige

The German share of loanwords in English seems to be much more moderate compared to the massive influx of French borrowings. Some lexemes are characterized by unique German semantic contents, e.g. *auslander*, *autobahn*, *blitzkrieg*, *doppelganger*, *kindergarten*, *schilling*, or they belong to a semantic field specific for the German speaking territories, e.g. *alpenglow*, *alpenhorn*, *alpenstock*. Isolated loanwords may be interpreted as “learned” - *Bauhaus*, *Biedermeier*, *bildungsroman* or *Ablaut*. The nature of the contact between German and English, and German and Serbian varies to a large extent, and consequently German loanwords in English and Serbian will only occasionally strike a Serbian EFL learner. The German lexical items *Biedermeier* may trap a Serbian EFL learner, but mostly with regard to the meaning. German pronunciation rules are straightforward and very few pronunciations change significantly as a result of translanguistic importation.

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