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Attitudes of English people towards lexical borrowing

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English, one of the most spoken languages nowadays, is far from being a perfectly pure language. Throughout its long history, it has borrowed thousands of words from nearly any language spoken on the earth. Sheard states that “*the actual number of native words in any of our large standard dictionaries is extremely small with the number of foreign borrowings recorded*” (1970:323). It is because English has been prepared to accept words from almost every language with which it has come into contact that its vocabulary is richer than the vocabulary of other leading languages. Selden (cited in Sheard 1970:320) notes that “*we have more words than notions, half a dozen words for the same thing*”. As a consequence of this richness, the greater the choice, the greater the risk of error.

In spite of this, there have been periods in the history of English when the feeling of purity has been strong. One of the complaints of the purists has always been that “*the tendency towards borrowing developed after the Norman Conquest has had the effect of diminishing the capacity to make use of native material to hand*” (Sheird, 1970:328). They have seen borrowings as a sign of ‘decadence’ and ‘mental laziness’. This only shows a lack of imagination and very often the words are used only through a feeling of superiority in being acquainted with another language, and, perhaps the most important, there is a serious objection to such borrowing in that many people are unable to understand new words (ibid. 321). Despite of these objections, English continues its rapid expansion of vocabulary at the present day. In this essay we will try to explain briefly the attitudes of English people towards borrowing words since Old English (OE) onwards.

The largest proportion of the OE lexicon was native in origin. They preferred to use their own linguistic instruments to create new lexical items. OE relied primarily on compounding and affixing to form new words. Both word formation processes were extremely productive in this period.

e.g.: *sunbēam* (sunbeam)
luftācen (love token)
wīdsæ (open sea)
innefeoth (inside property)
efibōt (again healing)

Sometimes, triple compounds were formed: *winterræ dingbōc* (lectionary for winter) or *biterwyrtdrenc* (drink of bitter herbs). Thus, they used their own native morphemes to make up new words for foreign objects and notions. This resulted in only 3% of foreign borrowings. The only major influence in OE vocabulary was Latin. Because the language of the church was Latin, Christianization brought some Latin loanwords to English.

e.g.,: alter (altar); calic (chalice); mæsse (mass); fers (vers)

With the Norman Conquest in 1066, the linguistic history of England changed forever. Claiborne (1990:88) states that “*the Norman Conquest unified England in a way that no native king, even the Great Alfred, had managed to do, brought it permanently within the economic and cultural orbit of western Europe, and grafted a vigorous offshoot of the French language onto the sturdy Germanic roots of English, thereby enlarging the English vocabulary by thousands of words*”. Bloomfield, (1965) affirms that it was this what changed the attitude of English speakers towards borrowing foreign words freely.

At the beginning, French loans entered English slowly. This was due to the fact that any linguistic community needs a period of time to adapt the new lexical innovations and begin to feel comfortable by using them. By the 13th century, “*the number of French loans making their first appearance in English texts increased steadily ..., crested during the 14th century, and began to decline toward the end of the 14th century*” (Millward, 1987:171). Little by little, French loans expanded to all semantic fields with differences in usage depending on the social class. Sir Walter Scott, (cited in Claiborne, 1990:95) says that “*the English swim, sceap, cyna and calfru tended by the peasantry became the Norman-French porc, moton, boef, and veel served upon the Lord’s table*”. It is estimated that about 60% of borrowings enter in the language at that time.

Nevertheless, some aspects of English life remained untouched by French loanwords. Millward provides the example of farming terminology. According to him, as Norman masters left their English servants to work the fields by themselves, they kept English words for them.

Eg.,: acre, field, sow, harvest, horse, ox, cow, sheep, he, goose, duck, barley, wheat, seed...

Some of the words introduced during this time are so familiar today that they are completely seen as native ones today:

E.g., age, blame, catch, chance, cry, enter, face, save, hello, fresh,...

Apart from French influence, many other words increase the English stock. Latin, Scandinavian, Celtic, Dutch, Low German, Greek, Arabic, Persian... are the main sources. But it was Latin the most influential of them all. During the 13th and 14th centuries, theological and scholarly writings began to be translated into English. As a consequence of

that, translators found numerous and serious gaps in the English vocabulary (especially words expressing philosophical, abstract and learned concepts). One of them said that “*there ys so many wordes in Latyn we have no prope English accordynge thereto*”. The simplest solution was to take the Latin word, for which hundreds of Latin words passed into English between 1200 and 1400.

Notwithstanding, a lot of ancestral English vocabulary remained in use. Baugh points out that “the English of whatever social class, still ‘*ate, drank, and slept, so to speak in English, worked and played, spoke and sang, walked, ran, rode, leaped and swam in the same language. They still lived in houses with halls, rooms, windows, doors, floors, steps and gates... Equally, the Englishman’s spirit might be French but his mind was still English, as were his body and all its parts: arms, legs, hands, feet, eyes, ears, nose and mouth plus brain, lings, arse, and bollocks*’”. (Claiborne 1990:105).

Until the 16th century, the process of lexical borrowing was unconscious. The English just assimilated thousands of new words without taking into account the consequences for the language. It will be during the next period, the Renaissance, that English will take a serious look at their language. The first attempts at a standardization of English were made.

Renaissance supposed the revival of interest in classical learning by means of translating authors as Caesar, Plutarch ...many of them were only accessible only in Latin prior to the 16th century. Thus, the Latin borrowings from the Middle English (ME) differed from the ones of Renaissance because the former had been borrowed directly from the church and the latter from classical Roman writers. The English vocabulary was not sufficient “*to express economically and elegantly the ideas they wanted to convey.*” (Millward,1987:198). Borrowing was the easiest and most obvious way to fill the gaps in English vocabulary, and Latin was the most obvious language from which to borrow. Millward notes that Latin loans outnumbered the French borrowings of ME. Subsequently, it is normal to find a strong criticism on this by part of the purists. They strongly protested against what they called ‘*inkhorn terms*’. The main objection was based on the obscurity and strangeness of these items. Ascham states “*many English writers ... usinge straunge wordes as Latin, French, and Italian, do make all thinges drake and harde*” (cited in Sheard, 1970: 250). Others, as Cheke, objected to new words just because they were new. He writes:

I am of this opinion that our own tung shold be written cleane and pure, unmixt and unmangeled with borowing of other tungen, wherin if we take not heed by tijm, ever borowing and never payeng, she shall be fain to keep her house as bankrupt.

But, he himself uses borrowed words in this passage such as *unmixt, unmangeled, borowing* or *bankrupt*.

On the other hand, there were many that accepted this practice. They were conscious that they were not the innovators. Other languages, including Latin and Greek,

had enriched themselves in this way. This position of the defender was generally summed up by George Pettie (cited in Baugh, 1990:220):

For the barbarousnesse of our tongue, I must lykewyse say that it is much the worse for them (the objectors), and some such curious fellowes as the are: who if one chaunce to derive any word from the Latine, which is insolent to their eares (...) they foorthwith make a jest at it, and terme it an Inkehorne terme. And though for my part I use those words as litle as any, yet I know no reason why I should not use them, and I finde it a fault in my selfe that I do not use them: for it is indeed the ready way to inrich our tongue, and make it copious, and it is the way which all tongues have taken to inrich themselves... I know not how we should speake any thing without blacking our mouthes with inke: for what word can be more plaine that this word *plaine*, and yet what can come neere to the Latine?...

The real purists resented borrowing because it contaminated English language purity. Most members of this group did perceive inadequacies in English words that had been lost, coining new words from the basic English stock.

E.g.,: Edmund Spencer used *gar* instead of make; *spill* instead of perish...

Even a number of EMnE writers attempted to ‘English’ technical vocabularies of various subjects:

Robert Recorde tried with: threlike for equilateral, saywhat for definition, over-reacher for hyperbole...

Despite the protests and despite the efforts of purists to substitute foreign items for native formations, the Latin loanwords continued to pour into English. Many of them were accepted without comment because they thought the language needed new words. If purists had reached their goals, the English vocabulary stock would not have had today essential words as abdomen, allusion, benefit, adopt, eradicate, appropriate, audacious, exit... Some 5000 words from this period have survived till our days.

Apart from Latin and French words, loans from other languages continued pouring into English. By the 17th century, English had borrowed words from more than 50 languages. Baugh (1990:222), notes that

“the attitude of most men seems to have been one of compromise. No Elizabethan could avoid wholly the use of the new words. Men differed chiefly in the extent to which they allied themselves with the movement or resisted the tendency. As is so after the case, the safest course was a middle one, to borrow, but without too manifest insolence and too wanton affectation”.

At the end of the 17th century, Dryden still feels the need to defend borrowing. “I trade both the living and the dead, for the enrichment of our native language”. (Sheird 1970: 251).

During the 18th century, it was thought that English was being ruined by the intrusion of foreign words, especially French. Defoe observed that ‘an Englishman has his mouth full of borrow’d phrases ... he’s always borrowing other men’s language’ (Baugh, 1990:286).

According to Baugh, French was in a strong position to influence English at this time since ‘it was at the height of its prestige’. Consequently, a large number of words were admitted by the language in this period’ (from 1650 to 1800):

E.g., : bullet, champagne, dentist, publicity, syndicate, cartoon, patrol, coquette...

It was during the 19th century that purist tendencies were again quite strong. Landor was one of the leading spirits of purism. His objections were based mainly on etymology. So, he prefers ‘put to death’ instead of ‘execute’ in spite of the established usage.

Macaulay also objected to several words in common use such as gentlemanly, influential and talented. Sheird (1970:312) points out that “so strong the feeling was, that any new word was sure to be carefully scrutinized before being accepted, and very many words, both new and well established, were subject to fierce criticism”.

Romanticism manifested a tendency towards cultural revival, that is to say, an interest in the language of the medieval past. For example, they preferred *foreword* to preface and *handbōc* to manual. Sheird states that ‘the feeling of the language was now against this type formation, for since the influence of French and Latin had been so strong English had lost its old facility for coining, compounding, and the use of native material to meet new conditions, and such words were looked upon as the foibles of cranks(1970:313). Jepsen ,referring to the revival of hanbōk vs. manual says : “we might have Ben satisfied with ‘manual’ and not put together that very ugly and very unnecessary word ‘hanbook’”.

When it comes to the 20th century, we can appreciate as thousands of words are invading English language although not with the frequency of Late Middle Ages and Renaissance. It is said that it has acquired words for nearly any language on earth. According to Millward, English vocabulary has “acquired more items during PDE than in all its preceding history.” The 20th century has been characterized for the rapid extension of scientific vocabulary and the spread of this to general aspects of life. For instance, denationalize, deodorize, devitalize, decivilize, dehumanize... previously used only in scientific texts. Recent trends are trying to argue if English language would have many gaps if all loanwords were removed. Pyles says that if English has not borrowed so much, it would have created new words for unknown ideas without the necessity of foreign sources. Sheird, as well points out that “if the power of creating new words characteristic of Anglo-Saxon hadn’t been lost, the gaps would have been filled by native words.” The current attitude is seen in the following quotation by Pearsall Smith:

These, then, are the two opposing ideals –nationalism in language, as against borrowing; a pure, as opposed to a mixed language. To those for whom nationalism is the important thing in modern life, and who could wish that their own race should derive its language and thought from native sources, a ‘pure’ language is the ideal form of speech; while those who regard the great inheritance of European culture as the element of most importance in civilization, will not regret to composite character of the English language, the happy shows of North and South, or wish to deprive it of those foreign elements which go to make its unparalleled richness and variety. (Cited in Sheird 1970:329).

Thus, the attitude towards borrowing born in ME has not still disappeared. English speakers are always innovating in their lexical stock. Nevertheless, it can’t be sure how long will last the new items within English. The current innovations are in a unstable situation.

To sum up, we can say that the linguistic history of England has been marked by the word ‘borrowing’. Since early times, English has been in contact with other languages and as a result, its vocabulary is quite rich although this richness can lead to vagueness sometimes. In a few lines, we can summarize the history of English loans. The Anglo Saxons showed a strong preference for the native word, while the ME preferred to borrow, there was a strong reaction in the Renaissance period. Then, the linguistic license of Elizabethan times was followed by a further reaction for purity in the 18th century and later, in the 19th century, a cult of Anglo Saxon would try to replace loanwords by native forms. Nowadays, the movement of purity has not still died ant there are some teachers who promote faithfully the Anglo Saxon word. Perhaps, as Hazlitt says, “the best word in common use, irrespective of origin, should be preferred” would be the best solution.

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