



The social meaning potential of loanwords: Empirical explorations of lexical borrowing as expression of (social) identity

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ABSTRACT

The use of loanwords is not merely a lexical act (filling a lexical gap in a given language, or using a shorter word in place of a longer expression) but also a socially meaningful one – a contextual expression of self, social identity and language regard. Recent lexical borrowing research has drawn attention to this social meaning potential of loanwords. What motivates language users to select a borrowed form over a receptor language equivalent, what is the (perceived) social meaning of this choice and how can we empirically address these questions?

This special issue seeks to bring into debate the interface between speakers (the social dimension) and language (the linguistic dimension) with regard to lexical borrowing, and to probe how language regard and speaker identity influence and explain the use of loanwords. In a bid to better understand this complex interface, the special issue includes papers that explore a range of empirical methodologies drawn from different subfields of (socio)linguistics and closely related scientific domains (linguistic anthropology, conversation analysis, corpus linguistics, social psychology and psycholinguistics) and documents a variety of contact situations: English loans into French and Finnish, Māori loanwords into New Zealand English, German loans into Dutch. Together, the different perspectives presented in this issue help advance our understanding of the relationship between lexical change on the one hand, and language regard and (social) identity on the other hand.

1. Motivations for using loanwords: beyond prestige

Lexical borrowing is one of the default mechanisms to add new form-meaning pairs to a language. Where other types of lexicogenesis, such as word formation, ellipsis, semantic extension or the creation of new roots, involve language-internal procedures, lexical borrowing results from a language-external process, namely from contact between a source (input) and receptor (receiving) language. The ease with which foreign lexical material can be transferred from one language to the next is reflected in the fact that “[i]n virtually every bilingual situation empirically studied, borrowed items make up the overwhelming majority of other-language material” ([1]; p.1). The strong presence of loanwords in languages’ lexical inventories is however not reflected in the amount of scholarly attention devoted to the topic, leaving some questions quite insufficiently addressed (*ibid.*).

For a long time, research on lexical borrowing mainly focused on (1) defining and naming the phenomenon, see [2] for a critical appraisal of the term “borrowing”, for noteworthy alternatives see [3]’s “copying” or [4]’s “matter replication”; (2) on delineating lexical borrowing from

other outcomes of contact-induced variation and change, primarily codeswitching, see [5,6] and see [7] for a nuanced perspective, also see more recent approaches drawing from Construction Grammar [8]; (3) on identifying the types of lexical material most prone to borrowing, see e.g. Field’s research on borrowability [9], but also [10]; (4) and on studying the processes used to adapt loanwords to the morpho-phonological structure of the receptor language, see [1] for an encompassing variationist account.

In recent decades, within the context of the global spread of English and the resulting influx of English loanwords in many language’s lexicons, scholars have broadened this research focus, paying more attention to the pragmatic context in which such Anglicisms occur ([11,12]) and to the dynamic processes and innovations that Anglicisms are involved in after entering the recipient language lexicon ([13]). This so-called socio-pragmatic turn in Anglicism research emphasizes that the use of loanwords is not merely a lexical act, a means to fill a lexical gap in a given language, or of introducing a shorter word in place of a longer expression ([11,14,15]). Selecting a loanword should also be considered a socially meaningful act, a contextual expression of

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self, social identity and language regard.

The distinction between the use of loanwords as a lexical act and as a social one reflects the two main motivations for lexical borrowing identified by Hock & Joseph ([16], p. 258), namely lexical gaps and prestige. “Prestige” is perhaps a bit of a misnomer here, or at least too restrictive a label, as it merely reduces language users’ social motivations for using loanwords to the respect or admiration they have for (the speakers of) the source language. It is to date unclear precisely how loanwords help language users express particular (social) identities, how stable the social identities invoked by certain source languages are, nor is it obvious how to empirically address these questions (see e.g. [11–15] for first attempts).

This special issue aims to provide empirically based alternatives to the restrictive label of “prestige” for capturing language users’ social motivations for selecting loanwords. To this end, we explore the potential of four interrelated theoretical constructs that foreground the social meaning creation that occurs at the interface between speakers (the social dimension) and language (the linguistic dimension): (1) social meaning, (2) indexicality, (3) (social) identity and (4) language regard. We briefly introduce each of these terms here. Section 3 then presents the four papers in this special issue, which explore a range of empirical methodologies drawn from different subfields of or fields closely related to (socio)linguistics (linguistic anthropology, conversation analysis, corpus linguistics, psycholinguistics and social psychology) and document a variety of contact situations (English loans into French and Finnish, Māori loanwords into New Zealand English, German loans into Dutch). Inspired by the four explorations presented in this issue, Section 4 closes off with a brief outlook on where to go next in the study of the social meaning potential of loanwords.

2. Key concepts for an identity-driven analysis of loanword use

Blom & Gumpers ([17], p. 123) state that “linguistic alternates within the repertoire serve to symbolize the differing social identities which members may assume”. Put differently, linguistic features, including alternations between loanwords and receptor language alternates, carry **social meaning**. This social meaning can be defined as “all social attributes associated with the [language] feature and, crucially, its users” ([18]). Such social meanings can apply quite broadly to a language feature, see e.g. foreign language display theory in marketing research, which states that the use of foreign languages in advertising evokes rather stable social stereotypes connected to the speakers of the language, e.g. “people with warm family life” for Italian, [19]. It can however also be constructed more locally; think of a group of monolingual English school girls who use the Spanish words *chica* for self-reference to delineate the boundaries of their social circle.

The fact that language variants are associated with such social attributes is known as **indexicality**: a language feature’s indexical value concerns the feature’s ability to evoke (“index”) social elements of the context in which and of the speakers by whom it is typically used. The term “indexical field” is then used to refer to all social meanings that a single linguistic feature, language variety or accent *can* elicit, and as such captures the social meaning *potential* of a variant ([20], p.464, but also [21]). As concerns indexicality, a distinction is further made between first and second (or higher) order indexicalities [22]. The former are associations between linguistic features and groups of language users (e.g. women, working class speakers, speakers from a certain geographic area). The second concerns associations between linguistic features and attributes ideologically linked to such a group (e.g. intelligence, toughness, laziness for “men”).

As the quote from Blom & Gumperz ([17], p. 123) reveals, language users crucially rely on this indexical meaning potential of language to co-construct their social reality, to express and create group affiliations, to delineate the boundaries between ingroups and outgroups. Language variation becomes a tool to express **(social) identity**. Tajfel & Turner [23] insist that a person’s concept of self depends on that person’s social

affiliations, on the groups to which he or she belongs. A person’s identity is hence not necessarily stable, as people belong to several groups at the same time, and vary their behavior depending on the particular group they interact with. A core concept in this sense is “community of practice”, a term coined to describe “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” ([25], and see [24]). Belonging to a specific community of practice concerns the competence to use appropriately “the repertoire of resources that the community has accumulated through its history of learning” ([26], p.180). Language is often one of the resources that needs to be used in a particular way to claim and hold membership of such a community of practice (see also [20,21]): the choice of particular language variants, codes, accents can be a means to portray understanding of what matters in a given community of practice ([26], p.180).

In this way, in selecting particular variants in particular contexts, language users also reveal their **language regard**. Preston ([27], p.96) defines such language regard as a speaker’s cultural knowledge and belief systems concerning the social meaning of the language variants and varieties in their repertoire. The term hence functions as an umbrella encompassing language attitudes, ideologies and metalinguistic beliefs, referring to “the entire process of positioning and organizing languages, varieties, and their units and use within the belief structure of groups”. The indexicality of a linguistic sign hinges on the fact that it is (consciously or unconsciously) noticed and classified as meaningful in addition to “their strictly message-carrying function” ([27], p.95).

In sum, social meaning concerns the social perceptions of speakers and hearers indexed by specific linguistic variants, which facilitates the expression (and perception) of social group membership and (social) identity. The way in which specific codes index social identities has been discussed in the codeswitching literature, where the focus lies on switching between grammatical systems within and across utterances, see mainly Auer’s accounts of metaphorical codeswitching, e.g. [28,29]. In the context of lexical borrowing, which mainly concerns the incorporation of lexical items from a given source language in a receptor language, research on the social meaning of borrowed items is, as discussed above, largely absent (but see [14,15,30,31]).

This special issue presents four methodological explorations that delve into the social meaning potential of lexical borrowing, drawing on five different fields (anthropological linguistics, multimodal conversation analysis, psycholinguistics, social psychology and corpus linguistics) and four different contact settings to address the inter-relationship between lexical borrowing and social meaning, indexicality, (social) identity and language regard. The issue grew out of a theme session with the title “Lexical borrowing as expression of culture, identity and attitude – empirical investigations into the social meaning potential of loanwords”, organized by the special issue editors at Sociolinguistics Symposium 22 (Auckland, New Zealand). Below, we introduce each of the four studies, which split the special issue neatly between a qualitative approach and a quantitative one.

3. Four perspectives on lexical borrowing as expression of (social) identity

In the first paper of this issue, “The life of a loanword: A case study of *le coming out* in the French magazine *Têtu* (1995–2015)”, **David Divita and William Curtis** adopt an anthropological perspective in charting the evolution in the English loanword *le coming out* in a French magazine. Such an anthropological perspective centralizes the semiotic potential of language, foregrounding indexical meanings triggered through language use. The paradigm emphasizes (language) socialization, the bi-directional process in which novices in a community of practice acquire sociocultural community norms and prevailing ideologies through and in language use and other semiotic modalities, guided by more knowledgeable members of the community (see [32,33]). Intriguingly, the authors apply this approach in a mass-media

context. Qualitative discourse analyses of the use of the term *le coming out* in the French gay lifestyle magazine *Têtu* across a 10-year period reveal how the symbolic function of the term is intensified throughout the years, providing a means through which the magazine socializes its (new) readers into embracing the significance of the term “le coming out” for the community of practice under scrutiny.

The second qualitative paper in this issue discusses the link between lexical borrowing and social identity in quite a different social setting. In “The indexical value of lexical borrowing in a ‘remembrance culture’-community of practice: German loanwords in Belgian WWII-testimonies”, **Kim Schoofs and Dorien Van De Mierop** draw from conversation analysis and discourse analysis in their multimodal analyses of Dutch and French testimonies. Following the tenets of discourse analysis, their analysis is highly data-driven, providing a detailed analysis of discursive features in the data. Drawing inspiration from **multimodal conversation analysis**; (see e.g. [34]), this sequential analysis of the verbal data is complemented by special attention to body-related, artefactual and spatial aspects of the interaction. The results reveal the broad social meaning potential of German loanwords in the testimonials, used to index both ingroup and outgroup, with fuzzy in-between cases, indexing the unique social meanings which arise within the specific discursive context and particular community of practice.

The third paper of this special issue, “Same old *paska* or new *shit*? On the stylistic boundaries and social meaning potentials of swearing loanwords in Finnish”, brings language regard to the forefront, providing results of a matched guise experiment on the use of the English loanword *shit* in Finnish, versus the receptor language alternative *paska*. Exploring the potential of methods from **psycholinguistics** (in working with acceptability ratings) and **social psychology** (in working with speech samples capturing different styles rather than isolated pieces of written text), **Johanna Vaattovaara and Elizabeth Peterson** uncover the way in which this specific English swearword and its Finnish alternative are processed and positioned by Finnish speakers from diverse socio-demographic backgrounds. They found that quite generally, consistent across groups of respondents, the English term indexed urban lifestyle or slang, and is considered unnatural when introduced in an utterance that includes dialect features.

Where the first three papers study the behavior and use of particular loanwords in context, the final paper in this issue brings an understudied epiphenomenon of borrowing to the foreground. In “Perception and Flagging of Loanwords – A diachronic case-study of Māori loanwords in New Zealand English”, **Katie Levendis and Andreea Calude** study parameters that might influence whether or not a particular Māori loanword is flagged in a New Zealand English newspaper articles, viz. whether or not any typographic or discourse-related marking is used to highlight the foreign status of the word. Using methods increasingly broadly employed in quantitative **corpus linguistics**, such as generalized linear models, the authors show a surprising lack of significance for the effects of listedness (whether or not a Māori word is included in New Zealand English dictionaries) and frequency. A more qualitative analysis reveals that it is rather the language regard of the journalist that might explain the absence or presence of flagging.

4. Where to go next

We hope that this special issue highlights the benefits and fruitfulness of bringing ideas from related linguistics sub-fields, such as anthropology, quantitative linguistics, multi-modal conversation analysis and psycholinguistics, to what has been historically a much inward looking area of language inquiry (namely loanwords). While the selection of papers included here are only a beginning towards such endeavors, we hope that they serve as useful examples of what can be learnt from these approaches.

The focus on specific loanwords (and in some cases, on a small set thereof, or even a single one) borrowed in a specific language is both a

limitation and an advantage – a limitation, because it necessarily cannot be automatically generalizable beyond the case-study at hand, and an advantage, because it brings a detailed and focused view of a contact situation which is investigated with insider knowledge. Thus, the studies in this volume point to a need for a bigger-picture consensus of what can sometimes seem like disparate language events, addressing questions such as:

- 1) Given a language contact situation, what are the most significant social factors which guide speakers to make lexical choices that take them outside the heritage lexical resources of their language? This question ties in with the broader issue of the stability of social meanings of language variants. Although the sociolinguistic notion of the indexical field allows for substantial fluidity in these meanings, it also assumes substantial shared knowledge in the community. Loanwords could provide the ideal testing ground to further study the flexibility of social meanings both from the perspective of the individual language user and from the perspective of the speech community.
- 2) How does the nature of the language contact situation shape or impinge on these factors; for example, how does the outcome change when two minority languages come into contact with one another, compared to say, when one minority language and one majority language come into contact with one another?
- 3) How do awareness of a lexical item's status as a borrowing, intelligibility of the item and attitudes towards the donor language and language community influence the item's social meanings and its use? Answering this question will contribute to disentangling the intricate relationship between language perception, language regard and language production in general.
- 4) Which methods (or better, combination of methods) offer the most efficient approach to address the above questions? Which questions are better tackled using qualitative methods, which lend themselves better to quantitative tools and how can we bring together both research traditions to come to the best possible understanding of social motivations for borrowing?

Ultimately, we hope that the special issue makes a strong case for the consideration of the expression of speaker identity as a motivating factor in the use of loanwords, regardless of the language contact situation and, in complementarity to other social factors and existing language-internal factors affecting this use.

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