Lexis

Journal in English Lexicology

3 | 2009
Borrowing

Foreword

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/lexis/623>

DOI: 10.4000/lexis.623

ISSN: 1951-6215

Publisher

Université Jean Moulin - Lyon 3

Electronic reference

Denis Jamet, « Foreword », *Lexis* [Online], 3 | 2009, Online since 27 July 2009, connection on 24 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/lexis/623> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/lexis.623>

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Foreword

The problem with defending the purity of the English language is that English is about as pure as a cribhouse whore. We don't just borrow words; on occasion, English has pursued other languages down alleyways to beat them unconscious and rifle their pockets for new vocabulary. *James D. Nicoll*¹

Lexis, an e-journal boasting an International Scientific Committee (ISSN 1951-6215), publishes papers on the English lexicon written from both synchronic and diachronic perspectives, in the form of two annual thematic issues, as well as book reviews and a number of special issues containing conference proceedings. It is hosted in France by the *Groupe de Recherche en Linguistique Anglaise* (GRLA), *Centre d'Etudes Linguistiques* (CEL), Jean Moulin University – Lyon 3. It has already published two issues: one on “Polysemy” and another on “Lexical Submorphemics”. The third and current issue is devoted to “Borrowing”.

Borrowing has played a crucial role in the history of the English lexicon – and still does. As an example, some 10,000 words were adopted from French between 1250 and 1400, and roughly 75 per cent of them are still used nowadays. Contrary to popular belief, the borrowing of French words is still very frequent in English, in order to connote culinary refinement for example, as noted by K. Allan & K. Burridge [2006: 185]²:

How much classier a meal becomes when a *leek tart* is changed to *flamiche aux poireaux*, *oxtail* to *queue de boeuf* and *tossed salad* to *salade composée*. *Soup* versus *potage* de whatever, *stew* versus *casserole*, *slice* versus *tranche*, *aged* versus *affiné*, *swimming* versus *nageant*, *in aspic* versus *en gelée*, *reheated* versus *réchauffé* – all distinguish the mundane from the elegant.

[...]

‘How to’ books for menu designers in the US advise using foreign languages to ‘continentalize your menu’.

Borrowing is therefore not just a question of filling in a linguistic gap, but also serves other functions, as is developed in the articles.

The practice of borrowing is also known as using “loanwords”. Interestingly, a slight semantic difference can be noted between the two terms: “borrowing” refers to the process, whereas “loan-word” refers to the result, i.e. the linguistic material which has been borrowed from a foreign language. Yet, “borrowing” is also frequently used to refer to the result of such a process, as in “*this word is a borrowing from Old Norse*”, therefore following a metonymic process (result for the process). Etymologically speaking, the words “borrowing” and “loan” come from the financial field, and have to do with money exchange; a quick search on *WebCorp*³ confirms this intuition. The metaphorical process has made it possible for words referring to the transfer of money or goods to be used in linguistics to refer to the transfer of words. But the metaphor cannot be spun for long. Indeed, this third issue on lexical borrowing

¹ Usenet group *rec.arts.sf-lovers*, 1990.

² Allan Keith & Burridge Kate, *Forbidden Words. Taboo and the Censoring of Language*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007.

³ <http://www.webcorp.org.uk/>

poses a lexical puzzle, because if you think about the borrowing process in real life, differences quickly emerge with the linguistic phenomenon. When you borrow something from someone, you are supposed to give it back, one day or another, and give it back in good condition, i.e. in the same condition as you have borrowed it. To tell the truth, this is not exactly what happens between two languages, which do not seem to be as well-behaved as human beings. As a matter of fact, there is no real “transfer” from one language to another, as the source language keeps the loan-word; and there is no return either, because rarely does a language give the word back, except if we consider that it gives back the word when it cannot enter the lexicon of the language that borrows. And when the word is kept, what happens then? Not only does the language which borrows keep the word, but very often, it modifies it in one way or another: the borrowed word can undergo phonological modification (French *lingerie*, /lɛ̃ʒʁi/ vs. GB *lingerie*, /'lændʒəri/ and US /,lɑːndʒə'reɪ/), semantic modification (to carry on with the culinary trend, the word *chef* in English does not have much to do with the original French *chef*, which has a much wider range of meaning), morphological modification (*maître d'*, the shortened form from French *maître d'hôtel* attested as from 1953), and even grammatical modification (consider the traditional change countable / uncountable), etc. There is consequently a long way to go for a word to be accepted in the English lexicon: starting as a foreignism, a word can, through the process of conventionalization, a.k.a. domestication, become a loan-word, i.e. a real neologism of the English language. But it can also die along the way, and never be accepted.

Finally, as editor of *Lexis*, I would like to extend my warmest thanks to Aurélia Paulin and Jennifer Vince who agreed to be in charge of this issue on borrowing, as well as to the members of the International Scientific Committee who refereed the papers submitted. My thanks also go to the authors of the five papers appearing in this issue for their interest in *Lexis* and for putting up with my numerous emails during the refereeing process.

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