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Introduction

ROTEM KOWNER and JUDITH ROSENHOUSE

English is the lingua franca of the modern world, the ‘vehicular’ language used for science, international business and for communication at virtually any large international meeting. Speakers of English can be found in almost any corner of the globe, which is no wonder when you are the main or the official language in over 75 states and territories. Indeed, since WWII, English has occupied a new position never held by any other language before: it has become a global lingua franca. This is attested by the extent of its geographical spread, the number of its speakers and overall significance. Yet, English is not only spoken by an unprecedented number of people, both absolutely and relatively, but it also serves as a fertile field for lexical borrowing. That is, other languages are increasingly turning to English as a source for new vocabulary and incorporating English loan words in their lexicon.

This volume explores the determinants of and motives for contemporary lexical borrowing from English, using a comparative approach and a broad cross-cultural perspective. By analysing 12 different languages, we isolated a number of factors that describe pattern of borrowing from English at present. From an analysis of the borrowing processes in these languages, all following similar lines, we are able to offer an account of historical trends in lexical borrowing, and to draw broader conclusions about the spread of English.

The book opens with a historical review of the emergence of English as a global lingua franca and a presentation of our hypotheses regarding the motives for lexical borrowing from English in world languages. This introductory chapter is followed by 12 chapters; each serves as a case study of a different language. The contributors of these case studies, many of them renowned linguists in their respective domains, were approached to write not only because of their original contribution to the topic but also because of the special standing of their respective language within linguistic studies. Thus, two languages are described here for the
first time in the context of English loan words and their effects on the receiving language: Teferra describes the state of affairs of the Amharic language in Ethiopia and Shahavar writes about the Persian language in contemporary Iran. These two countries have witnessed turbulent political and cultural changes and development in the 20th century which have left their marks on their official languages, as analysed in these chapters. Other chapters depict similarly intriguing historical background and diverse types of contacts with English as well as with British and Americans. These chapters include Ben-Rafael’s study on the French language in France; de Vries Jr.’s study on the Dutch language; Kowner and Daliot-Bul’s analysis of linguistic borrowing in Japan, a nation which underwent a period of American occupation in the 20th century after a major trauma during WWII; and Lai’s chapter on Taiwan–Chinese, whose recent history fluctuates between Chinese and English.

Additional chapters examine the political circumstances which have affected the state of two languages representing East and Central Europe in our book: the Russian language brought forth by Yelenevskaya, and the Hungarian language, the latter reflecting a joint effort by Gombos and Sturcz with both editors of this volume. The case of Hebrew (by Rosenhouse and Fisherman) and Arabic (by Rosenhouse) in Israel presents the case of two official languages within a single State. Two chapters discuss specific details in the process of borrowing English loan words: Sapir and Zuckermann analyse relevant semantic processes in English loan-word borrowing in Icelandic, while Kurzon brings to light processes of ‘hidden English’ in various regions of India. This selection of languages also offers a picture of processes occurring in many language families: Latin, Germanic, Iranian and Slavic within the Indo-European language group; Northern, Central and South-Western languages within the Semitic (Afro-Asiatic) language group; a Finno-Ugric language (Hungarian), an Altaic language (Japanese) and a Sino-Tibetan language (Taiwan Chinese).

All in all, not only the general framework of the book is novel, but several of the chapters in this volume deal with adoption processes in languages that have never been examined hitherto. Some of the chapters also put forth new or unheeded facts. Among these we find, e.g. the role of phonosemantic matching in lexical innovation and the intricate structures it involves, or the fact that political regimes (or their changes) or linguistic authorities (and purists) cannot change the course of lexical development. In fact, even political VIPs (e.g. in France, Japan, or the Netherlands) cannot help using English loan words.
Critically, this book suggests that the English lexical ‘invasion’ depicted in each chapter is a natural and inevitable process, driven by psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic and sociohistorical factors. Moreover, it demonstrates that borrowed loan words constitute part of the normal way languages develop and survive. Although speakers’ attitudes concerning loan words (either pro or con such words) may be emotional, we conclude that when borrowed lexical items are used in communication, the main driving force behind them is apparently the need for efficient and expressive communication. This conclusion may be generalised beyond the English borrowings in the languages studied here to other languages, to other forms of linguistic communication, such as metaphors, and to universal linguistic structures such as the transfer of lexical items between dialects of a certain language or different language registers.

This project began in early 1997 as a collaborative research of the two us, comparing the adoption and usages of English loan words in Japanese and Hebrew (Kowner & Rosenhouse, 1997, 2001). The issues raised during this limited undertaking prompted us to probe into the broader questions of the general pattern of and motives for adoption of English loan words throughout the globe. Throughout this decade, we have been fortunate to collaborate with many bright and enthusiastic scholars, who shared with us their thoughts and knowledge in many conference panels, workshops and informal meetings we organised on this topic. During those years we came to owe a debt of gratitude to many people. Foremost among them are the contributors to this book, who supported us patiently and enlightened us with their insights on their respective language and culture. Similarly, we are grateful to the Research Authority at the University of Haifa, for its generous financial support provided during 2002–03 for a ‘University interdisciplinary project’ on ‘Models of semantic patterns for adoption of loan words: A comparative interdisciplinary and cross-cultural research’. This grant has been very useful for conducting frequent workshops and for the completion of this book. We also extend our thanks to Swantech – Sound Waves Analysis and Technologies Ltd. – for kindly allowing us the time to complete this project. Finally, we are indebted to our spouses, Fabienne and Giora. As always, they endured our academic pursuit without complaint while providing a constant source of moral support.