



Reconstructing gender ideologies of English loanwords in Chinese



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ABSTRACT

This article explores how English loanwords appropriated into Chinese are not merely linguistic adaptations but need to be understood as ideologically influenced processes of nativization (i.e. Chinesization). It focuses particularly on how traditional gender ideologies are re-constructed through examining the following aspects of gender assignment in English loanwords: gender associations in personal names, gender metaphor, gender visualization, and gender markers. Based on examples of loanwords representing these aspects of gender assignment, we find that gender feature values often change as English words are nativized into Chinese, and further, we find that such gender assignments often strengthen rather than resist traditional ideologies of gender in Chinese.

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1. Introduction

Loanwords have long been recognized as important linguistic phenomena that emerge in contexts of language and cultural contact (e.g. Haugen, 1950; Lehmann, 1962; Hockett, 1979). This article examines loanwords or cases of lexical borrowing from English into modern Mandarin Chinese. Though some scholars contend that Chinese has, historically, been more resistant to loanwords compared to many other languages (Norman, 1988; Wiebusch and Tadmor, 2009), other scholars point to lexical borrowing as an important process that has occurred throughout the history of the Chinese language (Tai and Chan, 1999; Hoffer, 2005). However, most agree that the intensified importation of English loanwords into Chinese is a relatively modern phenomenon (Shi, 2000; Ge, 2002; Wei, 2003). Not surprisingly, Hong Kong Chinese has far more English loanwords compared to other varieties of Chinese, an effect of the extended contact between British English speakers and Chinese speakers during the nearly 150 years in which Hong Kong was a British colony (Hoffer, 2005). For most of that period, until 1974, English was established as the sole official language. In contrast, the absorption of English lexical items into Mandarin Chinese in Mainland China began to accelerate only after the implementation of the 'open-door policy' in 1978. This phenomenon has continued to gain momentum over the last two decades with the large-scale push for English language education, beginning in grade three in primary schools.

The recent rapid increase in lexical borrowing from English into Chinese is indicative of the desire among Chinese speakers to 'join the trend of international modernization' (Sun and Jiang, 2000, p. 98). Indeed, stereotypic positive associations of English with modernity, progress, innovation, and upward mobility have been documented among Chinese speakers (Wiebusch and Tadmor, 2009; Xu, 2009). At the same time, the global spread of English and its potential for colonizing other

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languages has been discussed at length by numerous language scholars, most notably by Phillipson (1992, 2013), who views the continued internationalization of English as a hegemonic process in which powerful Western nations, particularly the United Kingdom and the United States, advance their interests through the teaching of English and through promoting the use of English for global commerce and scholarship. Awareness of this potential for English to ‘colonize’ their national languages has led some linguists and government officials in countries such as China and Japan to resist the adoption of English loanwords (see Kubota (1998) for discussion regarding these views in Japan). With regard to China, Li (2004) discusses governmental efforts to prevent linguistic ‘contamination’ (p. 104) of Mandarin Chinese from foreign languages such as English as well as from Chinese dialects. Such efforts to maintain the linguistic purity of Chinese do not, however, appear sufficient to counterbalance the ongoing appropriation of English lexical items into Chinese by contemporary Mandarin speakers (Li, 2004).

Although the spread of English into contexts such as China can be regarded as the incursion of a global language into the domains of other languages, the same phenomenon can simultaneously be understood as creative appropriation by users of the receiving language. That is, the adoption and incorporation of English is not merely a one-way process, but one in which receiving societies can adopt aspects of global languages and create hybrid language forms to fit their own needs (Canagarajah, 2004; Pennycook, 2010). Dor (2004), in fact, argues that the global expansion of English may ‘actually be working to strengthen ‘other’ languages’ (p. 98). Many scholars (e.g. Ang, 2001; Tam, 2002; Dor, 2004) view current language borrowings as a contestation site between the global and the local. The global–local interaction offers a new paradigm for understanding contemporary language–cultural contact. In discussing the large-scale adoption of English loanwords in modern Japanese, Seargeant (2005) uses the term ‘glocalization’, coined to refer to situations in which ‘global pressures are made to conform to local conditions’ (p. 314). Seargeant argues that the adoption of English loanwords into Japanese is better understood in terms of such localizing processes rather than notions of hegemony or imperialism, given that outside terms and cultural meanings are, in fact, Japanized or ‘absorbed into a pattern of Japanese social expression’ (p. 314).

We believe there are concurrent processes taking place when English words are borrowed into the Chinese language system. One is the Englishization of Chinese by which English loanwords have impacted Chinese morphology, grammar and syntax (as explored by Shi and Zhu, 1999; Wang, 2001; Guo and Zhou, 2003; Shi, 2004) and have created an Englishized identity in the Chinese language system, such as through the development of Chinese lettered words, ‘IT时代’ [aiti shídài] (IT era), ‘T恤’ [tìxù] (T-shirt), ‘X射线’ [èks shè xiàn] (X-ray), etc. These phonetic-ideographic compound loanwords formed by Latin letters and Chinese characters now comprise a robust word-building method in the Chinese ideographic lexical system, and promote the morphological diversification of the Chinese writing system, once dominated solely by ideographic characters. The other is English nativization, or the Chinesization of English-derived words, a result of which is that English loanwords acquire a certain take-for-granted Chinese quality and lose part or all of their English identity, such as in semantic transliterated words and loan-translation words.

Our particular interest here is to examine the incorporation of loanwords into Chinese, what we call processes of nativization or Chinesization, as not merely linguistic adaptation but ideologically influenced lexical changes in which Chinesization is carried out selectively. Such an approach to lexical appropriations and their ideological shaping does not ignore the very real concerns of English as hegemonic on a global scale. However, we argue in this article that English loanwords of varying types can be understood to provide symbolic contact surfaces for reconstituting dominant ideologies and traditional power relations in Chinese culture. At the same time, we recognize that there are numerous influences on contemporary Mandarin and that change occurs on multiple scales and in response to diverse cultural shifts. We have chosen to adopt a more narrow focus here by exploring one appropriation process and its ideological implications.

Social constructionist approaches to language and discourse (Burr, 2003) propose that language does not merely represent or describe what already exists, it produces social reality. Loanwords are no exception. After all, it is nearly impossible for loanwords to straightforwardly represent the world given that they entail the appropriation from the semantic domain in an ‘Other’s’ language into one’s own language. At the same time, when English loanwords are appropriated into Chinese they are made to conform to the conventions of Mandarin Chinese; these borrowings become part of the Chinese language system and in most cases these words lose their English identity rather quickly. Indeed, scholars who have examined loanwords in Chinese from a solely linguistic, rather than an ideological perspective, have argued that in many cases these are not so much examples of borrowing but of linguistic assimilation into existing Chinese morphemes (see Norman, 1988). Whether one views it as borrowing or assimilation, the incorporation of loanwords into a language inevitably involves contested language–cultural identities.

Loanwords can thus be understood as active sites contributing to the distinction but also the blurring between ‘us’ and ‘other’. And as such, loanwords can be seen as a politically and culturally charged medium over which ‘conflicting social groups, classes, individuals or discourses are all trying to use symbols and make them bear their own meanings’ (Eagleton, 1983, p. 117). In the processes by which the Chinese language has incorporated English borrowings, it is important to consider how culture and ideology have been articulated in the appropriation of the new into the traditional. We recognize that there are numerous influences on contemporary Mandarin and that change occurs on multiple scales and in response to diverse cultural shifts. Further, there are many illustrative cases that could be presented for the ways in which English loanwords undergo a process of adaptation which aligns them with ‘traditional ideologies’ in China. We will take gender as the focus for our exploration of this ideological framing in English loanwords in Chinese.

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