

SOCIOLINGUISTIC STIMULI TO DEVELOPMENT OF THE ENGLISH LEXICON – LANGUAGE CONTACT AND SOCIAL NEED

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Abstract. *Changes in a language at the level of vocabulary are often triggered by sociolinguistic causes, most significant being language contact and need. In language contact, lexical borrowing has proved inevitable, and, currently, it has advanced through the mass media and electronic channels of data transfer. On the other hand, the need for new lexical items which carry specific denotative or connotative meaning, as in terminological systems, jargon and slang, contributes largely to the expansion of a vocabulary. Specifically, a corpus of words produced and established in English since 1990, in both standard and nonstandard varieties of the language, demonstrates that the development of the vocabulary has been stimulated to a great extent by the two abovementioned factors, which, moreover, incorporate speakers as essential inciting force in the process.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In terms of sociolinguistic approach to the studies of language change language contact and social need are regarded as a significant influence upon changes that take place in many domains of the English language, most visibly in the vocabulary, which is developing daily as a result of the accumulation of numerous new words in both standard and nonstandard varieties of the language. Generally speaking, the production of new words is primarily initiated by the appearance of a new object or notion. Therefore, word formation progresses for the purpose of identification, i.e. naming of new entities in the material world and new concepts which broaden our knowledge and awareness of social and natural environment.

Two crucial sociolinguistic factors which have had an effect on the creation of new lexical units in the English language are **language contact** and **social need**.

2. LANGUAGE CONTACT

In the contemporary study of language change, language contact has been considered a very significant mechanism which governs changes at different levels in a language. According to Sapir (1921:192-206), for example, in an intercourse between the speakers of two languages, which presupposes an indirect or direct contact between the languages, the influence of the culturally dominant language on the other one seems inevitable. Furthermore, many languages borrow from the languages of the neighboring countries, which is labeled as **intimate borrowing** in Bloomfield (1967). This type of borrowing takes place when two cultures share the same geographic area and are in a dominant-to-inferior position. The dominance may be either of a political, military or cultural nature.

In Filipović (1986:17-18) it is held that languages come into contact under the following circumstances:

- a) when a word of the **giving** or **lending language** is taken over by the **receiving language** in the process of language borrowing; and
- b) when the native speaker of a language starts learning a foreign language in the process of foreign/second language acquisition.

According to the same author (1986:26), language contact may be successfully studied if the analysis is not limited to linguistic elements solely, since certain extra-linguistic factors contribute to the interpretation of its causes and results. Therefore, the phenomenon should be studied in social and cultural contexts, beginning with social circumstances which bring languages into contact, and concluding with the results of the contact at various linguistic levels. This approach is **sociolinguistic**, since the study is performed from the point of view of language systems in their social contexts, focusing on linguistic analysis, and language performance of members of social and political groups, focusing on sociological analysis.

Lexical borrowing is a prevailing consequence of language contact. Although lexical borrowing entails interfering with the vocabulary of a language, it is almost never chaotic, being governed by certain principles, and it sustains the development of the vocabulary of the borrowing language. The adoption of a lexical unit implies its adaptation to the phonetic and morphological systems of the receiving language; certain loanwords become integrated in the borrowing language to such an extent that they are no longer recognized as being of foreign origin. Also, a new lexical unit always enriches the vocabulary of the borrowing language: it names a new concept, product, or invention, or replaces an obsolete native word.

As suggested in Aitchinson (1991:113-117), detachable elements are the most easily and commonly taken over in the process of borrowing, and the adopted terms tend to be changed to fit in with the structure of the borrowing language. What Aitchinson refers to is, obviously, lexical borrowing, since lexical items are 'the most detachable' when compared to other aspects of the language system, such as phonemes or inflectional morphemes. Also, the borrowing of foreign lexical units does not disrupt the basic structure and integrity of a language. The regularities of borrowing are best seen in the process of adaptation of loanwords at different linguistic levels. Adaptation is a gradual process and progresses in small steps. Foreign elements are first imported, allowing no alterations or adjustments to the borrowing language, except at the phonetic level. Gradually, the word becomes partially and then completely morphologically adapted. In the process, borrowed words may introduce an innovation into the borrowing language, as for example in phonemic distribution or derivational morphology.

Languages have borrowed from one another ever since people first came into contact through immigration. In the earliest history of the English language it is possible to trace evidence that Old English borrowed words extensively from Latin, Old Norse and French. Some of the words of Latin origin are *wine, pepper, silk, copper, pound, mile*, etc. It is held that the greatest influence upon the English vocabulary was exerted by Norse and French. As far as Old Norse is concerned, according to Claiborne (1983: 91), the consonant group /sk/ is the proof that the word was borrowed from that language. This marker identifies borrowings such as *skil, skinn, sky* and *skoltr*. Very often, Norse supplied English with pairs of synonyms, since the borrowed words did not drive out the old English ones (Claiborne 1983: 92), but enriched the vocabulary instead, which is notable in pairs such as English *rear* and Norse *raise, shatter* and *scatter, sick* and *ill, wish* and *want, craft* and *skill*. Also, Claiborne (1983: 112) states that between AD 1100 and 1500 more than ten thousand French words passed into the English vocabulary, of which 75 percent are still in use, such as *fashion, prose, poetry, poultry, soup, chair, and blanket*.

In view of the fact that English has established donating supremacy in all language contact presently, vocabularies of many languages are not outside its influence. However, it is not to be neglected that English vocabulary as well has been developing in the process of borrowing from other languages. As estimated in [The Oxford Companion to the English Language](#) (1992), between 1987 and 1989, English borrowed 1029 words from 84 languages, precisely 25% from French, 8% from Spanish and Japanese each, 6,3% from Italian, 5,5% from German, and the rest from 77 other languages. The figures demonstrate that European languages do not borrow merely from each other, but also from languages spoken in communities on other continents.

The only European language which influenced English vocabulary in the last ten years is German. Only two examples are recorded in that sense, i.e. *Ossi* and *Wessi*, as derogatory terms for an East and West German respectively, the former being a shortened form of the German word *Ostdeutsche*, and the latter of *Westdeutsche*. The rest of the analyzed corpus of new words added to the English vocabulary in that period comprises loanwords from Japanese, namely *idoru* (A YOUNG FEMALE POP-STAR), *karoshi* (DEATH CAUSED BY JOB-RELATED EXHAUSTION), *otaku* (SOCIALY INADEQUATE YOUNG PEOPLE INTERESTED IN COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY) and *tamagotchi* (AN ELECTRONIC SIMULATOR OF A HOME PET).

From the examples cited above it is notable that political and economic affairs of countries in question had their influence in some aspects of Western politics, business practices and everyday life, which reflected on the growth of English vocabulary. Furthermore, it is apparent that languages not of the same origin and spoken in areas fairly distant from each other, as in the case of English and Japanese, may come into contact through intermediary channels, such as the mass media, news, political and military coverage, as well as other sources of information, including the Internet, a web of information which surpasses all spatial boundaries.

3. SOCIAL NEED

Another factor of great consequence at the level of vocabulary is **need**. In this sense, need involves production of new words whenever the speakers require them. In linguistic literature this view is referred to as a **functional view** of language.

Above all, it is understandable that in the era of constant scientific and technological progress the need for new terms is always present. New names are needed for new inventions, products and concepts which emerge in the course of study of natural and social phenomena. The analyzed corpus of English neologisms comprising words originating from 1990 onward suggests that scientific terms are most readily accepted and established in the vocabulary, their institutionalization being the result of convention. The expansion of **terminology** in a branch of learning is stimulated by the progress made towards scientific discoveries within the subject field. Presently, the most rapidly innovated spheres of human interest are electronics, with particular emphasis on computing, and medicine, especially in the domain of genetic engineering. The vocabularies of these disciplines have benefited to a large extent from an urge to produce new terms; new examples include *bit depth*, *calm technology*, *collaborative filtering*, *digital compression*, *hybrid CD*, *Internet 2*, *thin client*, and *voice portal* in electronics, *gene chip*, *molecular farming*, *therapeutic cloning*, *glycobiology* and *xenozoonosis* in biology and medicine.

Also, **jargon** is closely related to technical language; it is a standard variety of English characteristic of occupational subsocieties primarily. The production of new words in jargon is initiated, first of all, by the need of such groups to find a new term for a new entity within the relevant subject field. Apart from innovating technical terminology, professionals have a tendency to produce words with humorous and sarcastic association closely related to their interests. This is evident especially in the production of acronyms, such as those used by teams concerned with environmental issues, e.g. *BANANA* (*BUILD ABSOLUTELY NOTHING ANYWHERE NEAR ANYBODY*), *CAVE* (*CITIZENS AGAINST VIRTUALLY EVERYTHING*), *LULU* (*LOCALLY UNPOPULAR LAND USES*), *NIMEY* (*NOT IN MY ELECTION YEAR*), *NIMTOO* (*NOT IN MY TERM OF OFFICE*), *NOPE* (*NOT ON PLANET EARTH*) and *NOTE* (*NOT OVER THERE EITHER*). In certain respect, these words are intended to meet communication needs among specialists in the field, and although established in the language, they are rarely known or used outside the group. The cited examples illustrate specific connotations which suggest reference to particular concerns and struggles of environmentalists, with a hint of their irritation at human ignorance and carelessness about natural world. In some instances, the examples resemble words already in the language to intensify the effect on readers/listeners. Being restricted to specific contexts, these words are not widely known or used by people other than the members of a profession, but they are not necessarily nonce formations.

Presently, an extensively used jargon is that of Internet-related cultures, which involve people all around the world interconnected in online socializing through e-mail, forums, chats, etc. Having emerged as a prevalent means of data transfer, the Internet unified people of diverse nationalities, races or professions, who, in need of a common language, consequently developed the so called "online language" or "Netspeak". Admittedly, since the Internet is English-dominated, this language may be considered an English variety, which is, therefore, not to be disregarded in the issue of the production of new words in the language. The vocabulary used by such groups is constantly innovated in need of a more effective form of communication insisting on accurate and concise ex-

change of information and ideas. By examining the corpus of neologisms introduced into the computing vocabulary in use across the World Wide Web in the 1990s, it has been deduced that most often produced words are acronymic in form, obviously for the purpose of briefness, particularly within message boards. Some of these new words, predominantly typewritten, are the following: *BTW* (*BY THE WAY*), *BRB* (*BE RIGHT BACK*), *FYI* (*FOR YOUR INFORMATION*), *G2G* (*GOT TO GO*), *IIRC* (*IF I REMEMBER/RECALL CORRECTLY*), *IMHO* (*IN MY HUMBLE OPINION*), *ISTR* (*I SEEM TO REMEMBER/RECALL*), *LOL* (*LAUGHING OUT LOUD*), *OMG* (*OH MY GOD*), *ROFL* (*ROLLING ON THE FLOOR LAUGHING*), and *STFW* (*SURF THE FINE WEBSITE*). It is clearly indicated in the very morphological form of the examples that they have been created to help expedite communication and, what is more, the act of typing.

Another aspect of social need is identifiable in the growth of the vocabulary of a non-standard variety of English, explicitly in **slang**. In Lighter (1994), slang is considered as lexical innovation within a particular cultural context. Additionally, this context is principally subcultural, integrated in a dominant culture, as, for instance, the subcultures of rock fans, street gangs, hackers, etc. Slang emerges from different regional, ethnic or social vocabularies, which implies that the production of words in slang is managed by social forces more influential than an individual, and, therefore, they are very often diffused into wider usage. The most productive sources of slang are young people, drug addicts and popular black music.

The need for new words within slang is reflected in the idea that the vocabulary of this variety comprises words distinguished by the association they cover, expressing ridicule, contempt, or revolt against institutions, persons, concepts, and certain social occurrences and tendencies of the persons who create or use slang. Unlike jargon, a large number of slang words and expressions regularly spread across language community. In the last decade the English language has witnessed the creation of numerous slang words in different subcultural spheres, which are widely known in the language community since they are transferred from speaker to speaker or through the mass media. Young people have contributed words such as *banging* (EXCITING), *large* (EXCELLENT, EXCITING), *safe* (GOOD), *skank* (HORRIBLE, DISGUSTING), as well as a set of new terms for alcohol or drugs intoxication, i.e. *lashed*, *langered*, *mullered*, *hooted*.

The slang of lawbreakers has always been abundant in new words; most recent ones include *beast* (A PERSON CONVICTED OF SEXUAL OFFENCE), *basehead* (A PERSON WHO HABITUALLY TAKES COCAINE IN THE FORM OF FREEBASE), *hotting* (DRIVING RECKLESSLY IN A STOLEN CAR AS A FORM OF DISPLAY) and *loc* (A MEMBER OF STREET GANG).

Slang is frequently derogatory, usually when referring to physical appearance and sexual inclinations, as, for instance, *gym bunny* (A GAY OR LESBIAN PERSON WHO WORKS OUT OBSESSIVELY TO CREATE A BEAUTIFUL BODY), *slaphead* (A BALD OR SHAVEN-HEADED PERSON) and *slapper* (A WOMAN REGARDED AS PROMISCUOUS).

The examples above have become well-known in the language community primarily due to the mass media, precisely newspapers, and popular music, some of which, as hip-hop, rap, or rave, have established their own subcultures of people unified by unique behavior, ideas, speech, fashion style, etc.

4. INSTITUTIONALIZATION

A process essential to the growth of the lexicon of a language is **institutionalization**. Institutionalized words are established in a language and incorporated in the permanent inventory of the lexicon. The institutionalization of a word indicates that the word was created by productive word-formation rules and it is used universally across a language community. The process of institutionalization is not rule-governed, and it can hardly be predicted. Sociological factors, namely speakers themselves and their need for the word in question maintain a decisive role in the process.

Generally, it is possible to claim that words created by a collective social factor to meet a wider social need are likely to be commonly used in a language. First, as stated above, words produced by members of a profession or any other subsociety, be that drug addicts, black gangs, hackers, etc., even for the purpose of asserting the solidarity and cooperation within the group through language, are not likely to fall into disuse. Second, terms, which meet the need of specialists in a field of study, and not of an individual or a particular context, are readily established in a language once they are incorporated in the related terminological systems.

In addition, according to Tournier (1988), **potential vocabulary** is a part of the lexicon structure, and it consists of all forms, functions and meanings which can be produced by productive word-formation rules in a language. This point suggests that new words belong to the potential of the lexicon, i.e. its temporary inventory. Yet, their integration into the language depends on whether the speakers accept them in everyday usage, or, in the case of scientific terms, whether they are standardized by specialists in a subject field.

Finally, neologisms which are not established comprise the so called nonce formations, words created by an individual speaker for a particular context, text or speech act. These are mainly individual and stylistic neologisms, found in journalistic texts and literary works, whose meanings can only be deduced from a co-text or a situational context, which intensifies their ambiguity. They are quite often produced focusing on, above all, information condensation and expressive effect.

5. CONCLUSION

Linguistic data at the level of vocabulary, observed from the sociolinguistic viewpoint, are indicative of a notable stimulus nonlinguistic factors have on the development of the English lexicon. Language contact and social need incorporate contexts and subjects beyond language itself, namely the social environment and speakers. As mentioned above, language contact as a sociolinguistic factor of language change regularly introduces innovation into the vocabulary of a language through lexical borrowing. Furthermore, the corpus of words recently borrowed into English indicates that initiation of lexical borrowing does not demand that two languages be in a direct contact, which highlights the powerful intermediary role of advanced means of communication. In the era of continuous exchange of information among speakers of different languages, predominantly via electronic channels, language contact is inevitable and results in the increase of the lexical inventory of the borrowing language. Currently, in the majority of language contacts English has assumed the role of the giving language, principally due to the supremacy of the English speaking countries over the rest of the world in certain economic

and political matters. This point supports the idea that in the world where people keep abreast of scientific innovations and political and economic affairs, languages, no matter how geographically distant, can come into contact. It also proves that not only direct but also indirect contact between languages may bring about borrowing on permanent basis, with intermediaries as effective transfer channels.

On the other hand, research on vocabularies within jargon and slang in English, confirms a suggestion that the need for new words is among major forces which initiate the process of word formation. First of all, it is understandable that new inventions and notions in certain subject fields need to be lexically denoted, which entails the production of new terms to be established in terminological systems. Second, in slang, which differs substantially from the vocabulary of science, it is notable that there is a wide-ranging need to expand the vocabulary by new words which carry intense connotative sense to express primarily the speakers' mockery of or resistance to persons or institutions. Combined with many other aspects of subcultural environment, continual innovation of language in use within subcultures strengthens, in certain respect, the union of people who adhere to the same patterns of behavior and thought, whose language is distinguished for unique discourse and a vocabulary developed in need of an original mode of expression.

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SOCIOLINGVISTIČKI FAKTORI U RAZVOJU LEKSIKONA ENGLESKOG JEZIKA – JEZIČNI KONTAKT I DRUŠTVENA POTREBA

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Promene u jeziku na nivou vokabulara često su podstaknute sociolingvističkim uzrocima, od kojih su najznačajniji kontakt između jezika i potreba. U jezičkom kontaktu leksičko pozajmljivanje je neminovno, i, trenutno, podstaknuto je medijima za masovnu komunikaciju i elektronskim sredstvima za prenos podataka. S druge strane, potreba za novim leksičkim jedinicama koje nose posebna denotativna ili konotativna značenja, na primer u terminološkim sistemima, profesionalnom žargonu ili slengu, primetno doprinosi proširenju leksikona. Konkretno, korpus koji čine reči

stvorene i ustaljene u engleskom jeziku od devedesetih godina prošlog veka do danas, i u standardnim i u nestandardnim varijetetima, pokazuje da razvoj vokabulara ovog jezika u velikoj meri stimulišu dva potonja faktora, koji, štaviše, obuhvataju govornike kao bitnu pokretačku snagu u tom procesu.