

Comparison Between English and Chinese Borrowings

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Abstract: Borrowing exists in almost all languages and functions as a significant lexical constituent while bringing enormous impact on their lexical system. The target of this essay lies in discovering the distinctive features of borrowing in Chinese and English as well as making comparative analysis between both, leading us to a comprehensive view about the borrowing in both languages and their culture. The conclusion has been made that though English takes an advantage over Chinese in quantity, but Chinese plays the role of a more flexible and creative borrower, resulting in more variable language form and usage.

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In linguistics, borrowing, also known as lexical borrowing, is a process by which a word from one language is adapted for use in another. According to Etymology, the term of borrowing originated from old English, meaning "becoming". The word that is borrowed is called a borrowing, a borrowed word, or a loanword. While existing in almost all languages, borrowing functions as a significant lexical constituent and has enormous impact on their lexical system. English and Chinese, two of the most glorious blossoms in a human culture used by the largest population around the globe, both have bred unique, comprehensive, and dynamic language systems. This essay aims at revealing distinctive features of borrowing in each language as well as making a comparative analysis between both, by which we will obtain a comprehensive view about the borrowing in both languages and their culture.

Over the past 1,500 years, English has adopted words from more than 300 other languages. "

Loanwords make up a huge proportion of the words in any large dictionary of English," notes Philip Durkin in *Borrowed Words: A History of Loanwords in English*. "They also grew largely in the language of everyday communication and some are found even among the most basic vocabulary of English.

To begin with, English borrowing is featured with plenty of interesting characteristics. First but foremost, an enthusiastic borrower as English is, the largest number of English loanwords come from French. According to lexical statistics, French loanwords make up for around 30% of vocabulary in English. Conquered by the duke of Normandy in 1066, England was ruled by the French for hundreds of years. With tremendous French words crowding in, many English words can find their root in French. From familiar words like "canteen" ("cantine" in French) to "appetite" ("appétit" in French), to specialized words like "surgeon" ("Chirurgien" in French), it is believed that an English man can never get lost in Paris.

Secondly, denizens appear to be the most common form of borrowing words in English. Despite the truth that there're still many aliens and translation-loans existing in English (résumé, vis-à-vis, etc.), as time goes by, most foreign words have been conformed to native English in accent, form, spelling, and even in adoption of an English affix to follow English tradition and get involved ("maccheroni" in Italian).

However, on the oriental side of the world, plenty of more intriguing phenomena in borrowing is taking place. As a matter of fact, the definition of loanwords (外来语) originated from Japanese and was introduced in China in the early 20th century. However, it was not until the mid-20th century that "外来词" eventually substituted for "外国语" (foreign language) or "译语" (translation) and became popular. Similar to English, borrowing in Chinese is also equipped with a multitude of interesting characteristics.

To start with, transliterated words (音译词) predominate in the Chinese borrowing system. Since being excluded from the Indo-European language family, to achieve borrowing, it is the only way for Chinese to break the cross-phylum barrier. Accordingly, articulation serves as the most acceptable and effective bond between various languages. The most common examples are "巧克力-chocolate", "歇斯底里-hysteria", "引擎-engine", etc. We can find a majority of loanwords and their origins sound practically alike.

More surprisingly, the unique hieroglyph system enables the Chinese to realize multiple ways of borrowing compared with English. The overall borrowing, the half-transliteration borrowing, and the selected borrowing extend the scope and depth of the meanings that these words carry. We will have a detailed discussion about it later.

After having a brief understanding of their unique features, let's come back to the topic: how do they vary from each other, and what similarities do they share in borrowing?

Judging from the proportion of borrowing words, English, without any doubt, beats its opponent by a preponderance of 29%. While at the same time, in Chinese, linguists believe that loanwords only make up for approximately 10% by conservative estimates. How does that come into existence? A loanword results from language interaction, while the contact between different languages is mainly based on cultural exchange and communication. Hence, loanword is, to some extent, a preserve and extension of a foreign culture. That is to say, the large proportion of borrowing words in English is a demonstration of frequent cultural intercourse, while a smaller number of borrowing words in Chinese reveals a relatively isolated cultural environment in the historical process. And we can attribute it to a mode of production and political factors. From the perspective of borrowing objects, what has been acknowledged is that English borrowing usually happens among the same language family. At the same time, Chinese loanwords are more likely to be cross-lingual. "English . . . has freely appropriated the major parts of its vocabulary from Greek, Latin, French, and dozens of other languages. English vocabulary based on exploration and trade was often brought to England in spoken form or popular printed books and pamphlets. We get kayak from an Eskimo language, whisky from Scottish Gaelic, ukulele from Hawaiian, yoghurt from Turkish, mayonnaise from French, algebra from Arabic, sherry from Spanish, ski from Norwegian, waltz from German, and kangaroo from the Guugu-Yimidhirr language of Australia." It is believed to be more convenient and efficient to borrow vocabulary from a brother language with which the same root is shared. Yet owing to economic and technical development, nowadays, the familiar loanwords we adapt to in Chinese are mostly unexceptionally from western countries, such as the name of electronic equipment and technical terms.

Eventually, considering the types and flexibil-

ity of borrowing, systematic cross — linguistic comparisons reveal that almost all of the categories of lexical borrowing noted in the literature on English language change can likewise be provided in relation to Modern Standard Chinese. In addition, Chinese offers several options for borrowing lexical items not available to speakers of English. Except for the four major types of borrowing, it is also possible to borrow the meaning of an expression not by providing a morpheme — by — morpheme translation of individual components, but by translating the meaning of the expression as a whole: these are often referred to in the Chinese — language literature as ‘holistic calques’. Examples of holistic calques include 电话 electric—speech ‘telephone’, 电脑 electric—brain ‘computer’, 电影 electric—shadow ‘movie’, 双赢 double—win ‘win—win’, 自助餐 self—help—meal ‘buffet’ and 盗版 steal—publish ‘to pirate’. Moreover, many characters have been selected not only for their phonetic value but also to produce a Modern Standard Chinese word that bears a strong phonological resemblance to its English model, and at the same time, their semantic value is enriched. Many brand names, place names, and even product names fall into this category. Examples include 必胜客 must—win—customer “Pizza Hut”, 宝洁 treasure—and—tidy “P&G” and 奔驰 speed—run “Benz”. In fact, it is probably fair to say that no foreign enterprise trying to break into the Chinese market can expect to succeed without an auspicious phono—semantic rendering of its name. Driven by enormous interest, these phono — semantic brand names cater to people’s psychology, making themselves auspicious symbols. Examples of everyday lexical items include ‘基因’, basic—cause ‘gene’, ‘维他命’, preserve—people—life ‘vitamin’ and ‘黑客’ black—guest, ‘hacker’ being perhaps the most often—cited example. Contrastively, due to

the inherent characteristics of the language system, English is currently not able to realize borrowing with such high condensability and originality. In this way, despite the obstructions that the remote Indo—European family brings, the barriers act astonishingly as an advantage for the Chinese.

With so many distinctions discussed above, the similarity of borrowing in both languages is now evident. Both languages include basic types of borrowing. But more importantly, borrowing serves as an active tool in mutual communication while enriching the diversity of each language, opening up a new door for language development. It is owing to borrowing that new things are given birth to and further developed by lexical meaning. As a matter of fact, both English and Chinese share the great bonus of borrowing up to this day.

By presenting characteristics of borrowing in both language and comparing them from three aspects, we can come to a conclusion that although English takes an advantage over Chinese in quantity of borrowing, Chinese plays the role of a more flexible and creative borrower, resulting in more variable language form and usage. Moreover, the significant role that borrowing plays not only introduces brand—new innovations to our everyday life but also keeps reminding us — only by continuous learning and active communication can we make progress.

References

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