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A Linguistic Study of Lexical Borrowings from English in the Urdu Narratives of Early School Children

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Abstract

The research investigates the internalization of English vocabulary in the Urdu language in Pakistan. The data for the research was collected through the Urdu oral narratives of one hundred school children from class 1 to class 5 in the city of Multan, Pakistan, by showing them a picture and recording their narratives. The analysis was done both quantitatively and qualitatively. The quantitative analysis revealed that there were 1360 English words used in Urdu narratives produced by children. The qualitative analysis suggested that the children used technical English vocabulary related to the domain of medicine or food in the absence of their Urdu equivalents. However, the words were borrowed not only for the concepts related to the medical field but also those used in everyday common conversation. Thus, the study showed the growing internalization of English vocabulary, not only of technical and medical terminology but also everyday common vocabulary, which may have its roots in the status of English in Pakistan, which is considered to be the language of power.



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Keywords: Urdu-English bilingualism, lexical borrowing, relexification, loan words

1. Introduction

1.1 Linguistic Borrowing

Lexical borrowing is a common linguistic phenomenon. Almost all the languages of the world have borrowed lexical items from other languages, due to the socio-cultural and linguistic interaction. Labels can be borrowed from one language to the other. These labels are called the ‘loan words’ or the ‘borrowed words’. The borrowings take place due to the contact with the other language, which may replace already existing labels or provide labels for new concepts.

English has a plethora of words of foreign origin. English has borrowed words from other languages (Crystal, 2010). But now English has become the donor language and is the biggest source of new words for many other languages. English being the global language of knowledge and culture not only provides words for new items of use such as computer, smart phone, etc. but is also providing lexical items to other languages which are replacing a substantial number of their existing words.

Urdu language draws some of its literary vocabulary from Persian, Turkish, and Arabic. These languages were introduced either by traders, invaders, or preachers. Now Urdu is a mix of some of the vocabularies from Persian, Turkish, and Arabic languages. Apart from these languages, Urdu has borrowed certain lexical items from English also, being in close contact with the Britishers. English is considered to be a language of power in Pakistan (Rahman, 2005) and has enriched the Urdu language with a variety of new lexical items. English is taken to be a “language of success, modernity, and power” in Pakistan (Myers-Scotton, 2006).

According to Kachru (1986), English is powerful because of its range and depth. Range refers to the total domain of functions that it performs around the world, while depth refers to the societal penetration of English.

1.2 Contact of Urdu and English

English was introduced in the Sub-continent as a colonial language, replacing first Persian and then Urdu as the official language. After independence, Pakistan tried to position Urdu as the national language. Special provisions were made in the 1973 constitution to mainstream the language and to substitute it with English as an official language. That aim, however, has not been realized as yet. Rather, society has moved towards increasing Englishization. Urdu language is an amalgamation of many words from different languages and particularly English. English has become the language of

power in Pakistan (Rassool & Mansoor, 2009). So, the educational institutes also offer English as a medium of instruction in schools.

Kachru (1994) postulates two hypotheses to explain the motivation for increasing interest in learning English as a second language and consequently of language borrowing from English into the local languages. The first is the ‘deficit hypothesis’ according to which borrowing takes place to fill the linguistic gaps in the lexical resources of the local language and the other is the ‘dominance hypothesis’ according to which lexical borrowing takes place from the culturally dominant language to the culturally subordinate language. In the Pakistani context, both hypotheses seem to have been at work.

1.3 Lexical Borrowing in Bilingual Societies

Lexical borrowing is a common phenomenon in bilingual societies. A monolingual has the lexicon of a single language at his disposal. So, the monolingual cannot initiate borrowing. Lexical borrowing is initiated by a bilingual as he has two codes at his disposal (Haugen, 1950; Mougeo, Edouard, & Daniel, 1985; Poplack, Sankoff, & Miller, 1988). Research suggests that bilinguals can use words from both languages in the same utterance as soon as they can produce two-word utterances (e.g., De Houwer, 1990; Deuchar & Quay, 2000; Lanza, 1997). One language is the donor language and the other one is called the recipient language. In the case of the present study, English is considered as the donor language and Urdu is the recipient language.

Lexical items related to modern technology, medicine, commerce, and institutions mostly originating in the Western countries arrive in Pakistan through the English language and are readily assimilated in the common discourse, as finding or devising their local counterparts may not be a convenient exercise. Similarly, English being the language of global culture, international trade, and higher education is perceived to be a culturally superior language, the learning of which, opens doors to better employment opportunities, integration with the wider world, and upward social mobility. This drive to learn English and assimilate it in everyday life has led to substantial borrowing particularly of lexical items from English into Urdu and other local languages. It can be considered as a coping strategy to overcome certain communicative difficulties in one or both of the languages that are concerned (MacSwan, 1999).

1.4 Why do Languages Borrow Words?

All the languages have their own resources to label items and concepts and are at liberty to create new labels for new concepts. Now the question arises as to why a language borrows a word from the other language and why certain words (and not the other) have been borrowed from one language to the other. It is understandable to borrow lexical items in cases where a complete equivalent is non-existent. Myers-Scotton (2006) calls it cultural borrowing, where words are borrowed ‘to fill gaps in the recipient language’s store of words because they stand for objects or concepts new to the language’s culture’ such as the words ‘automobile, computer, email, software, hardware, and website’. But again, in such cases, it can be argued that the recipient language can create a new word, instead of borrowing the word. Along with this, there are cases where a word already exists in the recipient language; still, the language borrows the alien word. (Myers-Scotton (2006) refers to it as core borrowings, which are ‘words that duplicate elements that the recipient language already has in its word store. Much has been written on the purity of a language. Nevertheless, the borrowed words frequently occur in the language, regardless of them being approved or disapproved by the experts. Moreover, these concerns cannot be tackled in a single study. For the present study, however, we will restrict ourselves to finding the types of lexical borrowings, as to which lexical items/registers/domains borrowed from English are used in Urdu narratives by school children belonging to the age group of five to ten, followed by the causes and conditions of their assimilation in the vocabulary of the recipient language.

There are certain factors involved in borrowing words, which are described below.

1.4.1 Factors involved in Borrowing

1. Non-availability of technical terminology
2. The prestige of the donor language
3. Ease to borrow nouns as compared to verbs
4. Culturally motivated borrowing (where a cultural import is accompanied by a lexical import).

2. Relexification

It is a kind of language inference where one language replaces some of its words with the words of another language. Urdu and English had been in close contact with each other during British rule, and English had a strong influence on Urdu. Thus certain English words have been assimilated into the Urdu language. There are certain words such as ‘school, college, university, doctor, dentist, waiting room’, which are used in daily Urdu conversation. Though their equivalents are available in the Urdu language,

but their use has either been confined to literary use only or they have been replaced by English terminology. Thus, people hardly use the terms '*maktab, dars gah, jameaa, tabeeb, dandan saz, intezar gah,*' which correspond to these English words. Now, these English words are used in common Urdu conversation. There are some other English words such as film, drum, tank, car, glass, cricket, hockey, football, parade, bicycle, jail, rail, and cigarette, etc., which have been internalized in Urdu. Likewise, English, as suggested by Crystal (2003), is the language of new technology, computers, and the internet. So, these terminologies can hardly be substituted in Urdu.

This phenomenon of the replacement of existing words of a language with that of another language is technically called relexification and mostly takes place where communities indulge in learning and adopting a new language which is deemed to be more prestigious and a source of culture and power. The process of relexification starts when lexical items are borrowed from the dominant donor language to the recipient language either due to convenience or due to deliberate choice.

3. Situation in Pakistan

In the Pakistani context, English language learning takes place early in life through schooling. Although English teaching is available in almost all the public and private schools, it is in private schools of large urban centers, especially those catering to the upper strata of society, where learning English takes place as a second language. In the elite schools in Pakistan, most of the subjects are taught in English, while a conducive environment is also created where children can learn and assimilate the language in a somewhat natural setting. Thus Urdu-English bilingual children use both these languages in their home settings and also in their schools. They also use English loan words in their everyday colloquial language. These borrowed lexical items belong to the following categories in Pakistan.

- (i) scientific and technological vocabulary
- (ii) medical terminology
- (iii) certain food items i.e., pizza, burger, cake, chocolate, candy
- (iv) sports i.e., cricket, hockey, football
- (v) electronic instruments i.e., air-conditioner, refrigerator, freezer, computer, phone, tablet, etc.
- (vi) piece of furniture i.e., sofa, seat, bed

3.1. Bilingualism and Language Borrowing in Pakistan

Lexical borrowing is a natural and common phenomenon present in all social settings where bi/multilingualism exists. Bilingual children have the capacity to use the two languages according to the context they find themselves in (Genesee, 1989). Lexical

borrowing takes place when a section of society engages in bilingualism and a transfer of lexis from the donor to the recipient language takes place. An average Pakistani child belonging to middle to high households in an urban setting goes to a private English medium school where he starts learning English from the age of three to five, thus experiencing bilingualism from an early age.

4. The Current Study

The current study aims to investigate the instances of lexical borrowing and loan words from a sociolinguistics perspective, which is defined by Hudson (1996) as the ‘study of language in relation to society. It attempts to understand the nature of language borrowing at the level of primary schools by means of narrative technique with the help of a picture of a boy visiting the dentist, which elicited responses from young students in Urdu. The study has been conducted with one hundred children of grade 1 through grade 5, studying in three elite schools in the city of Multan, Pakistan. With regard to language borrowing, we hypothesized that the children, while speaking Urdu, will borrow the lexical items in their native language from English in order to fill the linguistic gap for the items not available in Urdu. With regard to English being the language of power, we hypothesized that culturally dominant language will affect language borrowing.

5. Literature Review

Linguists have defined borrowings or loan words in multiple ways, but in simple terms, they are the words taken from one language and used in the other. When people belonging to one language community come in contact with people speaking another language, some people on both sides learn some phrases in the other language (Myers-Scotton, 2006). As Myers-Scotton (2006) states that ‘one group will actually take in its language some words from the other group’s language to refer to objects, activities or concepts’ and that ‘the exchange is never equal’ because the ‘group that takes the most is the one with less prestige in some vital public area, such as social-economic status or political control’ (Myers-Scotton, 2006). So, the speakers are more likely to borrow the words from a prestigious and attractive language (Myers-Scotton, 1996). According to Hudson (1996), people use some words from the other language because of the non-availability of the equivalent word in their native language and this seems to be the only option available to them. Moreover, the use of English increased due to the Anglo-American advancement in science and technology (Androutopoulos, 2007). The words from another language that are completely assimilated into the recipient language and considered as their own words can be called true borrowings (Heath, 2001).

6. Method

The data used in this study had been obtained from the corpus of early school children studying in private schools in the city of Multan, Pakistan. The students of class 1 to class 5 participated in this research. Picture-elicited oral Urdu narratives were used as a test measure to assess the lexical borrowings from the corpus. The participants of the study were shown a picture of a dentist's office, with a boy visiting him for a check-up. They were required to produce a story based on the picture shown to them. McCabe and Rollins (1994) suggested that the children start narrating stories as early as the age of two years. This ability to form stories is further improved through schooling. Children can produce narratives that include initiating events, attempts, and consequences (Merritt & Liles, 1987). It is because of this ability to form stories that an oral Urdu narrative test battery was used to collect the language samples. Their stories were recorded and analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively.

6.1 Participants

The subjects were chosen from a renowned private elite school in the city of Multan, Pakistan. The students from class 1 to class 5 participated in this study. Twenty students were carefully selected from each class. Thus, one hundred students were part of this study. The subjects of the study were Urdu-English bilinguals. These early years in school focus more on story-telling and story-making. So, the given task was not difficult even for the subjects from grade 1, as they had already attended school for three years in playgroup, nursery, and kindergarten.

7. Analysis

The participants from grade 1 produced short stories in Urdu based on the picture shown to them. The stories of the participants from subsequent grades grew longer. Fifth graders produced longer stories. All the narratives were replete with English words. Younger children used fewer lexical items from English. Older participants used more. The total number reached 1360 English words in Urdu narratives.

The table below gives the number of English words that the participants from each grade used.

Table 1: Number of English words used in Urdu narratives

Grades	English words in Urdu narrative
I	75
II	85
III	205
IV	466
V	529
Total	1360

The table above shows the details of the total number of English lexical items used in Urdu narratives by the subjects of the study. The younger children used fewer lexical items from English. On the contrary, the older children used a maximum number of English lexemes. The most frequently used term was ‘doctor’, which was used 319 times, and the term ‘dentist’ was used 289 times. The following donor words were frequently used in the recipient language---Urdu.

Nouns

The nouns have been categorized according to the domains.

Domain of medicine

doctor, pain, hospital, clinic, checkup, medicine, dentist, operation, office, x-ray, treatment, patient, injection, stretcher, appointment, ventilator, cavity, instrument, tools, ward, nurse, filling, machines

Food items

chocolates, ice-cream, candies, chewing gum, sweets, toffees, lollypop

Humans

mama, mother, boy, uncle

Furniture

chair, seat, bed

Parts of body

teeth, mouth, body

Emotions

Nervous

Celebration

party, birthday

Abstract noun

promise, problem, damage, payment, turn, time, sorry

Concrete nouns

dustbin, apple, paste, glasses, light, hole, seconds, one day

Building

room, washroom

Verb

start, feel, shout, open, tolerate, wait, free, confused, cover, call, relax, inform, and now he is out, what happened, vibrate, brush, check, lay down

Adverb

happily, daily, OK, and then

Adjective

better, good, hard

Preposition

Like

Conjunction

Because

The present study delineates that the children used more English nouns in Urdu since it is easy to accommodate the nouns from one language into another language without disrupting the sentence structure. They used fewer verbs from the foreign language in their stories in Urdu, as adjusting verbs from a foreign language in one's own language sometimes becomes a difficult task. Most of the nouns used by the children belonged to the domain of medicine.

The medical terminology, such as doctor, dentist, X-ray, clinic, hospital, ventilator, ward, operation, cavity, stretcher, machines, nurse, etc. has been borrowed from English, as there is no equivalent word form in Urdu language and which Myers-Scotton (2006) refers to as 'cultural borrowings'. Some of the English lexical items have now become a part of Urdu lexicon with a slight modification in their phonological forms e.g., /da:kter/, /wa:rd/, /hspəta:l/ and /a:preʃən/. This is called phonological integration which is 'the process of making borrowed words fit the sound system of the recipient language' (Myers-Scotton, 2006). Adults in Pakistan frequently use this medical terminology in their common Urdu conversation. So, it was apparent for the children to have used the same borrowed words.

Next, coming to the food items, it was observed that certain food items used by the participants have also been borrowed from English, such as sweets, chocolates, ice-cream, toffees, candies, lollypop, and chewing gum, since there is no lexical item available in Urdu for these food items. These lexical items have been borrowed from English as there are no Urdu counterparts and English labels are used in Urdu. The borrowing of food items is also an example of cultural borrowings.

The lexeme 'office' has also been assimilated in Urdu lexicon with the phonological modification /a:fis/. But the rest of the lexical items related to the domain of medicine, such as pain, check-up, medicine, treatment, patient, injection, tools, and instruments, have lexemes available in Urdu language. Still, the children preferred to use the English lexemes in their Urdu narratives. It is surprising to note that the translation equivalent of 'doctor' and 'dentist' is also available in Urdu: '*tabeeb*' and '*dandan saz*', but these Urdu lexemes are either not in common use or confined to the literary language use only. When these Urdu words were not a part of their lexicon, children could not use these terms.

One possible explanation of such kind of behavior is that the Urdu-English bilingual children in Pakistan frequently encounter such code-mixing in Urdu discourse. It is natural for the children to follow the same pattern of mixing elements from both

languages. Another justification for this can be that when people use two languages in a bilingual community, but 'one language prevails in most public discourse and certainly in all status-raising discourse, then the other language loses some of its vitality to that language, and it becomes the recipient language in borrowing and will even replace its own words with words from the dominant language (Myers-Scotton, 2006).

Furthermore, the English term 'uncle', which means the brother of one's father or mother, shows direct relation. In Urdu, there are separate terms for mother's brother (*mamu*) and father's brother (*chacha* or *taya*). However, in Pakistan, the term 'uncle' has become a generic term for any elder male in order to show respect. The majority of the children used the term 'uncle' to refer to the doctor.

Moreover, the words such as 'washroom, bedroom, mama' have been borrowed from English and are now frequently used in everyday conversation in Pakistan. In other words, most of the English nouns which the children used in their language samples have now become a part of common practice in Pakistan.

The results show a clear lexical shift in the number of vocabulary items from Urdu to English. The direction of the shift is predominantly from Urdu to English as very few Urdu words were used when they narrated the same story in English (though the English stories are not a part of this study).

Coming to the word classes, it was observed that the corpus showed fewer English verbs in Urdu sentences. In Urdu the concept of time is shown by tense and aspect through lexical and discourse devices (e.g., *kha raha he*, *kha raha tha*, *kha raha hoga*, *kha chuka he*, *khata raha hoga*). On the contrary, English expresses time through the tense and aspect using inflectional morphology (e.g., *walk*, *walks*, *walking*, *walked*). The participants of the study used English verbs with Urdu lexical devices. Some of the examples are given below.

/usko dentist kehte hian k apna mouth open kare/

/aur jab apna mouth open kerta he tu uska tooth bahir nikal dete hain/

/phir dentist usko kehte hain apna mouth open kro/

/phir jo dentist tha us ne us k dant ko check kia/

These switches were not accidental. They occurred in a systematic pattern. Here we see that this code-mixing within the sentences is not random but is rather subject to regular linguistic constraint. These code-switches are somewhat governed by some

rules. Urdu and English follow different word order. The participants of the study used English verbs with Urdu lexical devices without disrupting the sentence structure.

It was further noticed that the children expressed grammatical adaptation to accommodate verbs into Urdu grammatical structure. For example, the English verb ‘to feel’ was changed into ‘*feel hona*’ by a subject which is a common pattern of grammatical adaptation in Urdu language. Let’s take the following example from the participants’ narratives.

/check kiye/

/dant check kiya/

/uska check-up kia/

These Urdu sentences above have many English words but follow the grammatical structure of Urdu. This kind of structure is prevalent in Pakistan. The nouns ‘mama, doctor, dentist, teeth’, the verbs ‘phone and pain’, and the conjunction ‘because’ have been taken from English to fill a gap. The verbs ‘phone and pain’ are followed by the Urdu operator ‘kia’ and ‘ho raha tha’. The nouns ‘mama, doctor, and teeth’ are followed by postpositions (mama ne, doctor ko, teeth mai). These grammatical constraints do not occur in an English sentence ‘His mother phoned the doctor.

The children’s use of English lexical items did not violate the syntactic rules of the language. According to Halmari (2005), this language mixing in young bilinguals does not indicate any kind of language attrition or failure of inhibitory control. He does not consider code-mixing as a sign of failure or lack of mastery of the two linguistic systems. Rather it is highly systematic and requires the people to know how and where to indulge in it.

Overall, the nouns were mostly used as borrowed words. According to Sridhar (1978), “among single words, nouns outrank all others in the frequency of mixing, followed by adjectives, adverbs, and verbs”. The reason for this may be that it is easy to code-switch the nouns without disrupting the sentence formation.

8. Conclusion

There are certain technical lexical items, related to the field of medicine, which have been borrowed in the Urdu language from English. These technical terms do not have their Urdu counterparts and equivalents. In such circumstances, it is natural for the children to use the English terms, as they pick them from their surroundings.

However, in the absence of their Urdu equivalents, the participants successfully filled the linguistic gap using the English lexical items. So here we find that the second language was affecting the use of the first language. But at the same time, it still shows the successful handling of the two grammatical structures in the discourse. Since this borrowing is taking place at a limited scale, it is not to be taken as a potential threat as long as it fulfills the communicative needs of the speakers.

Nevertheless, the research showed the growing internalization of English vocabulary, not only of technical and medical terminology but also everyday common vocabulary, which may have its roots in the status of which English language has in Pakistan.

Finally, it can be stated that the study attempted to highlight the issues related to lexical borrowing among early school children and their inclination towards English language without being conscious of it. Although the investigation fills a gap in the area of early school children's linguistic habits, further research can be conducted on elder school children or include a sufficiently large number of subjects.

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Appendix

