

Assimilation of English Borrowings in Jaffna Tamil

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Abstract

The English borrowings in Tamil are pronounced strangely or differently by monolinguals since the sound system of Tamil differs from that of English. In casual discussions, assimilated forms of borrowings are used by interlocutors who may be all bilinguals or bilinguals and monolinguals. Monolinguals may tend to assimilate the English sound into Tamil due to unfamiliarity with English sound system. In this article, before attempting to study the nature of assimilation of English borrowings in the speech of Jaffna Tamil monolinguals, some general features of the sound system of English and Tamil are discussed initially and then some generalizations regarding the assimilation patterns of English borrowings are given. Ultimately the study intends to suggest a remedy to overcome issues linked with assimilation process.

Key Words: Assimilation, Borrowings, Euphony, Monolinguals, Phonetic Modification

Sound Variations of Languages

It is apparent that sound system of languages varies. The basic sounds in all languages are nearly the same. But the variation of sounds occurs as some sounds are significant in some languages and some other sounds are more significant in some other languages. For example, sounds represented by (la) and (ra) in Tamil and (ha), (sa) and (ʃa) in Hindi are prominent. In the Australian languages, the sounds represented by (ha) and (sa) are not found at all (Varatharajan, 1975, P.137)

Some languages are full of weak sounds while others have ample strong sounds. There are rules governing the occurrence of certain sounds in the final position and combined sounds in the intermediate position in words in some languages and such rules are not found in other languages.

Innumerable sounds can be produced by man. But only certain sounds are used by him in the spoken language. Sounds which are easy to be articulated and are distinctively identifiable from each other are used in the spoken language. The following statement endorses this view. “Of the indefinite number of distinguishable sounds which it can produce, only a fraction, of twelve to fifty are put to use in any one language.....from among the many possible, these have changed to be taken, mainly the sounds easiest to make, and broadly distinguished from one another”. (Varatharajan, 1975, P.137)

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The nature and weather influence the use of sounds in languages. Strong sounds can be found in languages spoken by people who struggle with the nature and attempt to control it, for their survival. People who do not confront with the nature and who indulge in the delight provided by the nature choose mild sounds in their speech. The English who live in countries which have severe cold climate use strong sounds. Clusters of two or three consonants in the initial position as well as in the final position of words can be found in their languages. English words like Strength, Grind, Prick, Click, Bright etc. can be cited in this respect. Tamils who live without much exertion to struggle with the nature in countries like India and Sri Lanka where there is a suitable climate for them, use mild sounds.

Features of Phonetic Changes

The changes occurring in the sounds of words are beyond the intention of speakers. The following comments are worth mentioning in this context. “Phonetic changes take place mechanically, independent of the will or even of the knowledge of the speaker, but with a regularity so limited in principle and a variety so disconcerting in results that one can hardly rediscover in it any of the characteristics of a given type of language.” (Varatharajan,1975, P.140).

The will of the speaker is not involved in the phonetic modification but it is the speech organs including the tongue which gradually cause the phonetic modification.

Many English words gradually find their way into the day-to-day speech of Tamil monolinguals in Jaffna. The names of new things and practices are pouring in almost daily. In business, industry, financial institutions, recreation and at home use of English words is very frequent. Most of the English borrowings undergo phonological change when they enter into the speech of monolinguals. The following remarks by Hudson (1980, P.59) are appropriate in this context. “It is common for items to be assimilated in some degree to the items already in the borrowing variety with foreign sounds being replaced by native sounds and so on.”

The basic reason for the phonological deviation found in the pronunciation of English words by Tamil monolinguals is the difference between the sound systems of English and Tamil and the number of phonemes in these two languages. The sounds produced by the English letters b,d,g,f,s, and z are new or troublesome for Tamil monolinguals. Ultimately these sounds are altered or adapted phonologically and pronounced conveniently by them.

Further, Francis (1963, P.133) explained: “As soon as borrowed words get taken up by monolinguals their sounds are adapted to the sound system of the host language. Within a generation or two of its first borrowed usually is forgotten by monolingual speakers, it has become naturalized.”

It is observed that phonetic modification occurs because of the euphonious effect. If two consequent sounds are of the same class or analogous in nature it will be easy to articulate their combined sound. Phonetic modification progresses towards this ease. This view is supported thus: “Euphony depends not only on custom, but even more on articulation and on ease of perception. What requires intricate or difficult movements of the organs of speech will always be

left us cacophonous, and so will, anything that is indistinct or blurred ”. (Varatharajan, 1975, P.140). For example, the English Bench, Rubber, Belt etc. have become borrowings in Tamil in their assimilated forms as peintu, r̥apar, and velitu. These assimilated forms are the result of euphonious effect.

Economy of effort is also a factor which influences phonetic modification. For example, the English Shock Absorber has become a borrowing in the Jaffna Tamil and is pronounced as tʃɔkatʃɔ:r” in a shortened form. Shortening of words in this manner is intended to speak much with less effort within a short span of time.

Further examples of borrowings in shortened forms are given below.

English	As Borrowings in Tamil
Identity Card	aidɪŋ ca:ddu
Battery	vattɪ
Factory	pækrɪ

One learns to speak a language as one listens to another person speaking it. The person speaking and the person listening to the language can't be expected to speak that language in the same manner always. The mentalities and the state of senses vary from person to person. Therefore changes occur in the features including the pronunciation of words of a language. The following comments are appropriately expressed by linguists in this respect.

“No two speakers of a language have absolutely identical habits of pronunciation and in some cases there is a great variation from person to person or from region to region. Consequently a good pronunciation of such a language need not be an exact counterpart of any one native speaker's pronunciation; if we establish habits well within the range of variation found among native speakers themselves, our pronunciation will count ... as good. (Hockett, 1950, p. 262)

“Tradition is by its very nature imperfect and inaccurate. No one has ever yet been able to prevent what passes from mouth to ear from getting altered on the way... And all through the life long process of learning one's mother tongue, one is liable to apprehend wrongly and to reproduce inexactly”. (Varatharajan, 1975, p. 146).

Assimilation

Assimilation is a kind of sound change commonly found in languages. In assimilation one consonant becomes similar to another depending on the point of articulation or the manner of articulation. The following remarks on assimilation elaborate it further.

“Perhaps the most common type of conditioned sound change is assimilation, whereby one sound becomes more like a neighbouring one. Obviously this can be considered a simplification of the muscular movements needed to pronounce a given word. Assimilation is a very frequent phenomenon in just about all the languages of the world. In terms of articulatory phonetics assimilation of consonants usually involves in one or more of the following three ways.

1. Point of Articulation
2. Manner of Articulation
3. Voicing” (Arlotto,1972, P.81)

The above features of assimilation are well recognized in English borrowings in their assimilated forms in Tamil.

The English Bomber and Ounce have been borrowed in the Jaffna Tamil and they are pronounced as ‘pɔmpəɾ’ and ‘auntʃu’. These assimilations are effected in terms of point of articulation.

The English Paint and Chimney borrowed in the Jaffna Tamil are pronounced as ‘peintu’ and ‘simini’.

These assimilations are based on the manner of articulation.

Assimilation can be categorized into two types i.e. 1.Progressive Assimilation and 2. Regressive Assimilation.

Progressive Assimilation

If a phoneme is modified in harmony with the preceding phoneme, the assimilation is called the progressive assimilation. Arlotto (1972, p.81) remarks thus. “Progressive assimilation takes place when the first phoneme is dominant and in some way makes the second more like itself”.

The following are some examples of English borrowings which have undergone progressive assimilation in the Jaffna Tamil.

English

As Borrowings in Tamil

Film

pɪlɪm

Camera

kæmæra:

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Basket	ba:skæt
Receipt	rɪsɪ:tɪ
Trouser	raʊsə
Watcher	wɑ:tʃə

Regressive Assimilation

If the pronunciation of a phoneme is changed in harmony with the phoneme following it in a word, the assimilation is called regressive assimilation. Arlotto (1972, P.81) stated thus:

“Regressive assimilation means that a consonant becomes more like one that follows; in other words, the force of the change proceeds backwards, from a phoneme to the one which precedes it. Presumably, the shift is explained as an anticipation of the muscular movements which go to make up the second phoneme”.

Some examples of English borrowings which have undergone regressive assimilation are shown below.

English	As Borrowings in Tamil
Pencil	pentʃɪl
Pension	pentʃæn
Principal	prɪntʃɪpəl
Ounce	aʊntʃʊ

Borrowings may be assimilated either totally or partially. There are borrowings which are used without being assimilated.

Following are examples of English borrowings in Tamil in terms of different types of assimilation as discussed.

Total Assimilation

English	As Borrowings in Jaffna Tamil
Bank	vanki
Kettle	keiθal
Advocate	appʊkɑ:θʊ
Will	ʊil
Court	kʊ:ðʊ
Rubber	rappɑr
Bankruptcy	vʌŋkʊrʊ:θʊ
Hurricane Lamp	ætikan la:mpʊ

Partial Assimilation

English	As Borrowings in Jaffna Tamil
Shock	sɔkkɔ
Bakery	veikkari
Inch	ɪntʃɪ
Certificate	cəttɪpɪkattɔ
Chain	sein

Unassimilation

English	As Borrowings in Jaffna Tamil
Acre	eɪkəɾ
Lorry	lɔɾɪ
Car	kɑ:r
Wine	wain
Campus	kæmpəs

Some Features of Assimilation Caused by the Difference of Consonantal Clusters between English and Jaffna Tamil

Due to the difference in the above discussed patterns of consonantal clusters between English and Jaffna Tamil, English borrowings in Jaffna Tamil undergo assimilation in a fixed manner. Some examples in this respect are shown below.

1. In certain words which have two consonants in combination in the initial position, a sound reduction occurs initially when they are used as borrowings in Jaffna Tamil to maintain an analogy with the Tamil phonetic system

English	As Borrowings in Jaffna Tamil
Train	rein
Tractor	ra:ktar
Transformer	ranspɔ:mar
Driver	raivar

2. Another feature in words which have consonant clusters in the initial position is that the consonant cluster is split by inserting a vowel sound to maintain an analogy with the Tamil phonetic system when these words are used as borrowings in Jaffna Tamil.

English	As Borrowings in Jaffna Tamil
Clerk	kɪlɑ:kkɔ
Brake	pɪrɛikkɔ

Plate	pɪleito
Grinder	kɪraɪndar
Blade	pɪleɪdʊ

3. In words which have consonant clusters in the final position, the split occurs in the final position as shown in the following examples.

English **As Borrowings in Jaffna Tamil**

Film	pɪlɪm
Bulb	valʊppʊ
Silk	sɪlɪkkʊ

4. Words which have consonants in the initial position are pronounced with a vowel sound initially as found in the following examples.

English **As Borrowings in Jaffna Tamil**

Store	ɪstɔːr
Station	ɪsteɪsæn
Stock	ɪstɔk
Start	ɪstɑːdʊ
Screw	ɪsʊkkʊrʊ

Discussion

It has been suggested that every foreign language word should be Tamilised before it is allowed for usage. When Tamilising a word, the traditions of Tamil language should be taken into consideration. In this respect, there have been various interpretations for tradition. However all the interpretations acknowledge one fact that lexical rules of a properly structured written language should be under study when creating a new language in that language. This approach seems important to some extent as it maintains the basic order of a language and avoids confusion that may be caused by the presence of foreign language words. However the approach is generally perceived harmful as it ignores the necessity for changes in the language in view of contemporary needs.

At one time, Sanskrit borrowings and other foreign language borrowings were totally Tamilised before they were added for usage. However at a later stage due to the great impacts of North Indian culture, Sanskrit words had to be used in a convenient form without being Tamilised. The Sanskrit letters /ʃa/, /sa/, /ai/, /ha/ and /hi/ were also used in Tamil. It seems impossible to eliminate the practical use of these letters in written form of Tamil, as they have taken a firm root. The use of these letters is helpful in writing several foreign language words so as to pronounce them accurately.

In the beginning, it was possible to Tamilise the foreign language borrowings. But presently great difficulties are faced in Tamilising borrowings because of the comparatively greater number of borrowings and greater degree of complexities involved in the process of Tamilisation at present.

In course of time new sounds enter into almost all languages due to language contact situations and introduction of new objects and ideas. There have been attempts to represent the new sounds in these languages. In Hindi alphabet two letters have been modified to represent the sounds of English F and Z.

During the last half of the 20th century, most of the borrowings in Tamil have from English. These borrowings have gained a firm position in the spoken Tamil in Sri Lanka and South India. Tamilisation of such words started declining but they are used with convenient English pronunciation by Tamils presently. When foreign language words are used in Tamil writing, particularly in creative literature they are either transliterated or used in their original forms.

Conclusion

The above discussion highlights the permanent status achieved by the borrowings and the subsequent entry of new phonemes in Tamil. In certain instances in Tamil writing, in place of foreign language words unfamiliar Tamil technical terms or approximately alternate Tamil equivalents are used. To make the meaning of such words clear, English words are given in parenthesis. These attempts may further widen the gap between the spoken and written forms of Tamil and the consequences may be harmful to the development of Tamil. Hence the adoption of a proper script reformation scheme to tackle the issues associated with foreign language borrowings in Tamil is stressed hereby.

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