

Consonant Phonetic Mutation in English Words Borrowed From Hindi

Ratul Sabui, I M.Sc.

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Abstract

In its endeavor to become a universal mode of communication, English started borrowing words from Arabic and oriental languages like Sanskrit and Mandarin. Semantic inadequacy is often cited as one of the chief incentives to the growth of loan word vocabulary. But in the process of borrowing, such words undergo changes in the pronunciation and other phonetic attributes. This article seeks to unravel the phonetic mutation undergone by Sanskrit and Hindi loan words in their English adaptations. The article deals majorly with consonant sounds which have undergone such changes.

Key words: phonetic mutation, consonant changes, borrowed words, Hindi and English

Introduction

Most languages build themselves around the external influences that fall their way. The lexicon of a particular language is constructed over ages, with words and phrases being borrowed from myriad tongues and English is no exception to this. As the industrial revolution was in the process of propelling the Europeans to greater heights, colonialization coaxed their languages to transgress beyond Anglo-Saxon and Latin. In its endeavor to become a universal mode of communication, English started borrowing words from Arabic and oriental languages like Sanskrit and Mandarin. Semantic inadequacy is often cited as one of the chief incentives to the growth of loan word vocabulary. But in the process of borrowing, such words undergo changes in the pronunciation and other phonetic attributes². This article seeks to unravel the phonetic mutation undergone by Sanskrit and Hindi loan words in their English adaptations. The article deals majorly with consonant sounds which have undergone such changes.

Hindi-Sanskrit Words in English – Mutations

- a) Before the advent of Hindi-Sanskrit loan words, English was unaware of the option that a word could begin with a post-alveolar fricative followed by a velar plosive in quick succession. We find such a combination in the word Kshatriya (|kʃætriə |), even the words moksha and rakshasa, where the consonant cluster (|kʃ|) appear in the middle of the word, show slight difference from the words like action (/'ækjən/) and auction (/'ɔ:kʃən/). While in the first two words, the plosive is more uvular, the latter show a general inclination towards the palate. This difference is so subtle that they are generally categorized together under velar plosives. In the widely used Devanagari script, such a pronunciation is designated by the grapheme क्ष.
- b) One of the most prominent mutations that characterize loan words is the change from a labio-velar approximant to more commonly used labio-dental fricative. We find such use in words like
- Veda (|'veɪdə|) from वेद (|weḍə|)
- Bodhisattva from बोधिसत्त्व
- Ayurveda (|aɪə'veɪdə|) from आयुर्वेद (|aɪuweḍə |)

Exceptions

There happens to be an exception in the word swastika (|'swəstikə |) where we see exactly the opposite taking place. In the English pronunciation, swastika starts with a |swɒ|, whereas in Sanskrit, it starts with |svɜ|. (This is a crude way of putting the pronunciation of the Sanskrit swastika. Most speakers of the north Indian languages use a labiodentals approximant |v| instead of |v|.)

- c) A common nature of all loan words containing 'd' is the change of sound from a palatal (|ð|) to the voiced dental plosive (|d|). The former is denoted by ढ in the Devanagari script which is the predominant script of Sanskrit, Hindi and their various dialects. As both Hindi and Sanskrit are phonetic languages, the grapheme carries a similar sound in

words. Incidentally in all loan words containing a root word with द, d is chosen as the apt replacement, thus bringing such a change in the sound. For example,

Hindi (|'hɪndɪ |) from हिन्दी

Sandalwood (|sændlwʊd|) from चंदन

Other examples include sudra, Hindu, Purdah, Dal, ayurvedic, tandoor, Veda.

Exception

An exception to this is seen in the words dacoit, pundit, and dinghy, where the 'd' sounds like (|d|) both in English and their Sanskrit root words.

In Hindi and Sanskrit, we also find the usage of an aspirated (|ð^h|) sound in the grapheme ध. whenever a word containing (|ð^h|) is included in English, the sound undergoes a transformation similar to its unaspirated version. For examples, Buddha (|'bu:də|) and dharma (|'dɑ:mə|). Other such words are bodhisattva, bandana, sadhu and sandhi.

- d) Unlike English, a palatised version of a voiceless dental plosive sound is prevalent in most of the languages of oriental origin. In Sanskrit, this sound is denoted by the grapheme त which carries the sound of a palatised |t|. Due to the absence of an adequate representation and absence of an equivalent, this sound changes in the alveolar plosive |t|.

For example,

Mahatma (|mə'hætɪmə|) from महात्मा

Mantra (|'mæntɾə|) from मन्त्र

Some other words which show such a change are cheetah, dacoit, Kshatriya, mahout, prakrit, satyagraha, sitar, suttee, sutra, swastika, tantra, blighty, bodhisattva, Sanskrit, and atman.

Removal of Aspirated Sound

Another prominent subcategory of this is the removal of an aspirated sound and insertion of |t|. This happens in chit (|tʃɪt|), and thug (|θʌg|). The reverse is always not true. All loan words with a |t| sound are not necessarily products of phonetic mutation. Words like chutney (|'tʃʌtni|), cot (|kɒt|), puttee and ghat retain the |t| sound both in the root word and the loan words. (Davis, Stuart. "Loanwords: phonological treatment.")

- e) In loan words containing the alphabet q, the English tongue tends to use the sound |k| which is a voiceless velar plosive. In words like Quran (|kə'rɑ:n|) and lacquer (|lækə|), a similar sound is implied. But their root words generally use a more uvular form of the plosive. Words with such a change generally come from Urdu, which is a language built on the platform of Arabic and Hindi.
- f) In words where the alphabet 'h' is not preceded by a consonant, we generally extend the vowel sound that precedes it. Such words, in their native form generally come with a glottal fricative sound which may be voiced or voiceless. For example, Brahmin and mullah. In English this sound comes only when a word starts with the grapheme 'h', such as hat and hang or when it is flanked on both sides by vowels.² Such an exception is visible in words such as sahib and sepoy (although sepoy does not contain an 'h', its root word is sipahi. Sipahi contains a voiceless glottal fricative.)

It may seem to be a particular variation from our point as some of the words mentioned do not have an 'h' preceding a consonant. Some of them are followed by vowels and some by diphthongs. Even in these words we see a similar deviation from the original sound and the glottal fricative sound is omitted in the English adaptation.

In words like maharaja (|mɑ:hə'rɑ:dʒə|), mahout (|mə'hɑʊt|) and mahatma (|mə'hætʃmə|), the articulation before and after the /:h/ sound remains the same. In English, these sounds are separated by a brief period of voicelessness where the glottis is kept open. The succeeding vowel is then continued with its normal articulation. In most north Indian languages, the entire vowel following /h/ is phonated with a whispery voice.

- g) When it comes to the removal of aspiration, English phonetics does not seem to make an exception even with the velar plosives |k| and |g|. For example, we have words like ghee, ghat, dinghy, gymkhana and cot. These words differ from the previous section as the vowel following |h| is not aspirated. Even in the other plosives (labial, dental, etc.) the Indian languages extend the aspirated sound to the succeeding vowel where we use the superscript |h̄| instead of |h|. ¹
- h) Though not as common as the previous phenomenon, the transformation from the affricate |tʃ| to the fricative |s| or |ʃ| is seen in a few words which had been borrowed from the north Indian tongues. For example, shampoo (|ʃæm'pu:|), sandalwood (|sændlwəd|).
- i) English as a language displays a prominent dearth of geminate sequences (sequence of two identical or nearly identical consonant sounds). Phonetically speaking, words like 'book case', 'this set' contain geminate sounds but we do not consider them in our situation. This is because the two consonants belong to separate words (than not, book case) or to separate meaningful sections of a word or to separate morphemes ("unknown"). On the other hand, Sanskrit, Hindi and most other north-Indian languages contain pure geminate sequences. When words with these sounds are adopted by the English dictionary, the geminate sounds give way to normal consonant articulations. Very often such a change is seen in words where there is a geminate sequence of plosives. For example, chakkar, tikka, puttee, pepper, etc.
- j) There is a vast difference in the sounds attributed to the graphemes 't' and 'd' in English and north Indian tongues. While in English, they carry the apical alveolar plosive sound, in Hindi, the articulation occurs further back. The apical part of the tongue touches the post alveolar region. Sometimes the sound becomes retroflex. For example, chit, chutney, dacoit, dinghy, pundit, toddy.

To Conclude

A language as widely spoken as English, it is natural to have various pronunciations for the same word. The growth of any language has multiple factors influencing its progress. The traits that have been referred to in this article are common to many pronunciations and thus form a common pattern in most tongues of the English Language. The causes of this mutation are various, including the lack of association with the source language.

“However, in time more speakers can become familiar with a new foreign word or expression. The community of users for this word can grow to a point where even people who know little or nothing about the source language understand and even use, the novel word themselves. The new word becomes conventionalized: part of conventional ways of speaking in the borrowing language.”⁴ (Prof. S. Kemmer, Rice University)

This conventionalization has been occurring since the first languages were developed. In this era, where globalization and networking has connected the entire world into a single unit, this process has accelerated, giving rise to new expressions and words.

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Ratul Sabui, I MSc. Physics
Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning
Sri Sathya Sai Senior Boys Hostel
Puttaparthi
Anantapur 515134
Andhra Pradesh India ratulsabui@gmail.com

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Ratul Sabui, I M.Sc.

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