Adapting English into Chinese

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A report on the many ways in which English words flow into Chinese

WHY IS English a global language? Although the reasons are manifold – historical, geographical, economic, political, social, cultural – the key reason, it seems to me, is linguistic: its morphology is simple, many of its words are short and pithy, and among the key world languages it has the largest vocabulary. These features have helped it become the most widely used language in the world: a situation that makes Uncle French and Grandpa German envious. English has been open-minded since childhood. In the long process of exchange, English words lost most of their inflections and words of different origins were mixed together (Burchfield 1984:13). Unlike traditional German and French, English has been open to foreign penetration and never drives new words out. It is this openness that continually enriches the language. Chinese also likes to borrow from other languages. Old Chinese borrowed 35,000 words from Buddhism, and Modern Chinese has absorbed countless words from Western civilizations. This paper inquires into the mutual borrowing between English and Chinese, summarizes the techniques of borrowing words from English into Chinese, and asserts that semantic transliteration is the best approach to adopting foreign words.

A circle of borrowing

Borrowing between languages never ceases and in the long run tends to be mutual. For example (and it is hard to believe), the English word *chemistry* has been traced back to 7th-century events along the Silk Road in Asia (cf. Luo 1999:23), as part of the following circle of borrowing:

kimya ('metallic liquid', in the Quanzhou dialect of Fujian, China)
_ *alkimiya* in Middle Arabic
_ *alchimia* in medieval Latin
_ *alquemie* in Middle French
_ *alkamye* in Middle English
_ *alchemy* in Modern English
_ *chemistry* in current English
_ *huaxue* ('science of changes') in current Chinese

Through this process, *chemistry* came back to China with a fresh look. Only the meaning has changed, from 'smelting metals' through 'making pills for immortality' to 'science dealing with substances'. As Crystal (1997:332) has noted: 'In most languages, the vast majority of new words are in fact borrowings from other languages – though this term is not a very appropriate one, as new words are not given back at a later stage! Borrowing proceeds in all directions.'

He was correct when he thought borrowing to be 'in all directions', yet he was not entirely right when he said 'new words are not given back at a later stage'. It is true that some Chinese words have been given away to English, such as *china, silk, tea, yen, chow mein, wonton, amah, kowtow, mahjong, ginseng, litchi, typhoon*, but *chemistry* is an exception, and it is not the only one. Borrowing between Chinese

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and English is indeed mutual, although the direction may change from one to the other, and the ratio of borrowing versus lending may ebb and flow with changes in relative power in the nations and languages involved.

A great number of loanwords have come to us from English, and melted into our culture, so deeply indeed that we forget their origin. We use loanwords in our daily speech unconsciously. In a seemingly ordinary sentence, say, 'They sat in a *shafa* (sofa), ate *bingqilin* (ice-cream), drank *kele* (cola), played *puke* (poker), and sometimes watched a *lalisai* (rally) on *dianshi* (television),' there are six loanwords. The Chinese Language Society of Hong Kong (CLSHK 2001) has listed 5,275 neologisms from Chinese works published in the 19th century. In this list, each entry is followed by its English equivalent, as most of these new words have been borrowed from English. Since China was opened to the world in the 1970s, the pace of borrowing has accelerated. Now China has entered the World Trade Organization (WTO), in 2008 Beijing will host the Olympics, and in 2010 Shanghai will host the World Fair. Words of foreign origin, mainly English, are surging into Chinese in large numbers, and will continue to do so.

How does Chinese borrow from English?

Borrowing between Indo-European languages is relatively easy: in terms of writing, either transliteration or transcription will do, sometimes plus an inflectional ending. From members of the Indo-European family to the Chinese language, however, borrowing is much harder. There are two barriers, both in terms of writing. One is that Chinese characters developed independently of the writing systems of the Indo-European family. The other is that Western letters stand for phonemes, while Chinese characters represent not only syllables but also morphemes and even single-syllable words (cf. Xu 2001). So, when borrowing an English word into Chinese, it has to be treated as a whole. Every Chinese character has some meaning, and as a result every transliteration arouses a certain association, which can cause misunderstanding if readers take it too literally.

The major difference between Chinese and English lies in morphology, the difference between their grammars being minor. Many an effort has been made to borrow words from English to Chinese, and this is done in several ways: through *transliteration, free translation, polysemy in transliteration*, and *copying without translation*.

- *Transliteration* is a kind of phonetic transcription. For example, 'Chocolate Wafer Cookie' is translated as *Zhukuli Weihua Quqi*. Such a phonetic loanword cannot however convey the meaning, and the transliteration may even be disgraceful. For example, 'fan' is translated as *shi* in Cantonese, which means 'shit' or 'dung' when translated back into English (Shao 2000). Another problem with transliteration was pointed out and explained by Liang (1929): that the phonemic length of foreign words resulted in 'the same name being translated in a hundred different ways by a hundred people'.
- *Free translation* allows a high degree of naturalization, but the Chinese word corresponding to the English word may have different connotations (cf. Gu 1998). Sometimes a semantic loanword unknowingly misrepresents the original, as when 'tragedy' is translated as *beiju* ('sad drama') and 'intellectual' as *zhishi fenzi* ('mind worker').
- *Polysemy in transliteration* An English word may correspond to quite a few Chinese words, creating a problem of multiplicity. 'President', for example, is variously translated as *zongtong, zongcai, dongshizhang, zhuxi*. Comparably, a Chinese word may correspond to several English words without distinguishing between them. For example,: both 'peasant' and 'farmer' are translated as *nongmin* ('farming man').
- *Copying without translation* can also be thought of as *zero translation*, as in such abbreviations as *CPU, CAD, E-mail, EMS, VCD, DVD, MIDI, MTV, GDP, ATM, SARS, CDC*. Excessive use of such foreign items may create difficulties for ordinary citizens, while language purists complain that the purity and unity of the Chinese language are being affected, even ruined.

It is therefore an urgent task to reach a consensus in approaches to borrowing foreign – generally English – words into Chinese. In an earlier proposal (Hu 2001), I have maintained that, when borrowing words from English, semantic transliteration be used as the best technique. For this purpose, I have created a

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new term for the product of such translation, that is, a 'phono-semantic loanword' (a loanword that is both phonemic and semantic): discussed more fully below. Though the term is new, the practice is old. In fact, many loanwords belong to this category, and I expect more such loanwords to emerge in future.

A history of word borrowing

Let me plot the history of word borrowing to demonstrate that semantic transliteration is a tradition that is worth maintaining. Things or ideas expressed by loanwords are in effect lexical gaps in a target language that lacks words corresponding to items in the source language (cf. Hockett 1958:436). Early Chinese borrowers of foreign words had to transcribe sounds mechanically. Translators of the so-called *Buddhist Bible* adopted transliteration for many words from Sanskrit, and did not hesitate to create novel characters and words.

Xu Guangqi, a leading scholar of the late Ming Dynasty and the first Chinese official converted to Christianity, carried forward the tradition of semantic transliteration. When he was translating *The Original Manuscript of Geometry* from Latin, jointly with Matteo Ricci, the Italian Jesuit, he translated 'geometry' [*geometria*, Ed.] as *jiho*, in effect retaining the 'geo-', and expressed the meaning 'a science concerned with measuring the earth', combining sound and meaning into one word with the parts *ji* ('how large?') and *ho* ('what shape?'). The word *jiho* can be considered a model of semantic transliteration.

In the 19th century, many English words came into Chinese, many of them semantically transliterated. Thus, the word 'beer' was translated into Chinese as *bier-jiu* that was a semantic transliteration already; and then in order to naturalize the translation into a two-character word, somebody created a new character *pi* with a character component 'mouth' and changed the translation into *pi-jiu*, meaning 'beer wine'. The popular noun *pijiu* has been used ever since. John Fryer, a British missionary, was employed as a translator for Jiangnan Manufacturing Bureau, and he summarized the techniques of translating scientific nouns and unifying technical terms as follows:

> Create a new name. If there is no such name in Chinese, and you have to set up a new one, then adopt one of these methods: First, add a basic structural part to an ordinary character, and you will get a new name. Pronounce the new character as the old one is read, such as chemical elements Mg – *mei*, Ba – *bei*, Ti – *tai*, Zn – *xin* … with a *jin* in them, meaning 'metal'; Si – *xi*, As – *shen* … with a *shi* in them, meaning 'nonmetal' … (Ma 1998:342).

The purpose of creating new characters in Chinese is to transliterate semantically by adding a new ideographic component to an existing phonographic character. Another example is *huashi* ('changed stone') for 'fossil' (Li 1876). This semantic transliteration was enlightened by the description of Shen Kuo, a great scientist in the Song Dynasty, of the discovery of animal fossils (Luo 1999). Unfortunately, the tradition of semantic transliteration was from time to time interfered with, and could not be consistently sustained. Frequently, political factors promoted different approaches to borrowing; the way of borrowing is evidently constrained by politics and has to serve the ends of politics.

Having got rid of political interference, the Chinese people are now opening their chest wide and embracing Western civilization, so that now an *anqier* ('angel') brings us *kele* ('cola'), the use of *yi-meier* ('e-mail') invites a *heike* ('hacker'), the *wan-wei wang* ('world-wide web') broadcasts a *tuokou xiu* ('talk show'), *zhuan jiyin* ('gene transfer') produces *kelong yang* ('cloned sheep') – so many new things to make modern life in China very colorful, and thousands of borrowed words to enrich the Chinese vocabulary.

Causes for diversity in borrowing

Individual Western words may be borrowed in any of three ways: transliteration, free translation, and semantic transliteration, each of these occurring in different historical periods or among different groups. Thus, the word 'laser' was first translated as *laise*, then in mainland China as *jiguang* ('excited light') and as *leishe* in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Many English words have therefore come into Chinese in two or more translated forms. Of the 5,275 loanwords contained in the *Etymological Glossary* (CLSHK 2001), only 1,700 are principal entries, while the rest are secondary entries referring to the same thing or idea as the principal entries. This means, on average, that one original word can have three corresponding loanwords in Chinese.

The causes of the diversity of borrowing are many-sided, and include variation in time and

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space and differences between societies and locations. The word 'vitamin' was translated in the 1920s as *weitaming* ('sustain his life'), was changed into *weishengsu* ('life-sustaining substance') in mainland China in the 1950s, when the Ideological Remolding Campaign was launched, during which some leading translators advocated free translation and naturalization to avoid the 'foreign tone'. The mainland has tended to translate freely according to meaning, while Hong Kong and Macau have tended to transliterate according to the sound.

It can be said that in mainland China, English words have been treated as captives and subject to transformation, while in Hong Kong and Macau loanwords were used spontaneously like a pidgin or creole formed in a colonial atmosphere. Nowadays, however, the HK way of using loanwords is influencing the mainland more than ever before (Lu 2000), a trend that can be seen in advertisements for *weitaming* coming back on the mainland media. Submerged in Western civilization, people in HK and Macao are highly tolerant of English and Latin-letter words (Wu 2001). Chinese people on the mainland and in other regions have different names for the same thing: for example, 'taxi' is *tikci* in Hong Kong, but was at first *chuzhu qiche* ('rented car') in the mainland, but now the two names are used there interchangeably. 'Tips' are *tieshi* ('allowance pence') in HK and *xiaofei* ('small fee') in the mainland. Faced with such variants, we need to analyze them, choose the better or best form, and try to transliterate semantically.

We can also inquire into the causes of such diversity from a cognitive perspective. Suppose a person who first came across a foreign word had no choice but to swallow it whole and transliterate it. Later he might gradually appreciate its implications and change the transliteration into a free translation or a semantic transliteration. In this matter, I agree with Masini (1993:136):

> The alleged logical sequence between phonemic and semantic loans was attributed to a lack of linguistic competence on the part of the speaker, who was not familiar with the exact meaning of the original word and therefore reproduced the model on the basis of its phonemic shape rather than semantic content.

Thus, 'microphone' can be called *maikefeng*, *kuoyinqi* ('sound magnifier'), *weiyinqi* ('micro-sound device'), or *huatong* ('talk tone'). The transliteration and the free translation of the same foreign word may belong to different parts of speech. Take 'hysteria', for example: its transliteration *xiesidili* is used as an adjective, while its semantic transliteration *yibing* is a noun. Unfortunately, once the approach is chosen to be free translation, many forms of translation of the same word spread unchecked, like a flood. For example, 'system' has a semantic transliteration *xitong* that is good enough: two Chinese characters correspond to two English syllables, and as a two-character word express the idea of 'a group of things that are related to the same stem'. But some borrowers come up with a lot of free translations to replace it: *xi, tixi, tizhi, zhidu, zhishi, jiti, fangshi, fenleifa*…. When native speakers of English use one word to express quite a few meanings, why translate it into Chinese as quite a few words? If native speakers depend on the context to differentiate the shades of meaning, we can do it too. Too many loanwords corresponding to one original will do us no good but cause trouble when word processing. The extremely free translation should die a natural death.

It is however understandable that an English word may have two or more Chinese loanwords, for the following reasons:

- Both or all are semantic transliterations with different ratios of sound versus meaning, as for example 'vitamin' as *weitaming* and *weishengsu*.
- Different phono-semantic loanwords have different applications, as for example 'opium' as *yapian* ('a black drug') and *apian* ('a pharmaceutical constituent').
- Translations for specific trades, such as 'wafer' as *weihua* (a biscuit in the food industry) and *weifa* (a micro-hair chip in the electronic industry), and 'robust' as *lubangxing* (a strong and durable computer) and Robust as *Lebaishi* (a soft drink that pleases everybody).
- Translations from varied viewpoints: for example, a popular Chinese name for 'pizza' is *bisa bing*, conjuring up a kind of Italian pie with toppings, named after *Bisa* (Pisa), a famous city in Italy; but a dictionary compiler has translated it as *piza bing* (assorted crust pie) that has both lost the Italian identity and never been accepted by eaters.

Various borrowings lead to various associations, which are often seen in trademarks. The word 'Human' has been borrowed by a soft-

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ware corporation in the form *Hongen* ('enormous favor') and has also been used for a brand of beer, *Haomen* ('noble family'). 'Welcome' is used as a name for brands of medicine with varied Chinese trademarks: *Weikang* ('stomach health'), *Weikang* ('health guard'), *Weikang* ('for health'), *Weikang* ('maintain health').

Eccentric loanwords may conceal the truth. 'Nippon' means 'Japan', of course, but when Nippon Paint entered the Chinese market, instead of being named *Riben qi* (Japanese paint) it was translated as *Libang qi* ('This paint makes a nation'), lest it be boycotted by Chinese consumers.

Loanwords may alter when the political climate changes. The English word 'information' has three loan-forms in Chinese. In 1899 it was translated as *qingbao* ('secret report/intelligence') and so used till the end of the Cultural Revolution. In the 1980s, when China merged into the international community, the loanword altered into *xinxi* ('news message'). Recently it changed into *zixun* ('data and message'), a word used in Taiwan. News media in the mainland, including China Central TV, have taken *zixun* from the other side of the Strait, probably to show that we are unifying Chinese words and are using a common language. Likewise, 'carnival' was translated as *kuanghuan jie* ('revelry festival'); now even CCTV calls it *jia-nianhua* ('joyous time'), like all the Overseas Chinese. Similarly, 'show' and 'taxi' have found their way via Hong Kong to the mainland, and *xiu* and *di* have become word-building components in General Chinese.

The feasibility of semantic transliteration

Association is in any case inevitable with Chinese characters, and helps in remembering a new word. Why then not try to transliterate semantically to obtain both the sound and the meaning? Semantic transliteration is feasible. We have no problem transcribing the sounds: Chinese has more than 400 syllables, enough to transcribe all the phonemes in the world and all syllables spelt with them (Zhong 1983:552). As for translating meaning, we do not have any problem either: a syllable corresponds to a cluster of Chinese characters, forming a large range for us to choose from.

Taking advantage of the wealth of homonyms in Chinese, great writers have written innumerable pieces of verse and prose. Here I quote from one of them: Zhao Yuanren (1953) wrote a complete story *Shishi Shi Shi Shi* ('History of Mr Shi Eating Lions'), using merely one syllable /shi/ with the four tones of Chinese pronunciation (1, 2, 3 and 4), as follows: *Shi*2 *shi*4 *shi*1*shi*4 *Shi*1*shi*4, *shi*4 *shi*1, *shi*4 *shi*2 *shi*2 *shi*1 ('A certain poet Mr Shi once lived in a stone house. He liked to eat lions, and pledged to eat ten lions'). Such ingenious creativity can be regarded as a model that lays bare the expressive power of homonyms. This feature of Chinese allows the borrower to manipulate English words freely, in a range of possibilities that includes loyal translation, approximate interpretation, flexible re-creation, and arbitrary rewriting.

Recently, the American penis-strengthener Viagra defeated its Chinese competitor *Weiergang*, because the English name can be semantically transliterated as *Weige* ('great brother', said in a woman's graceful and intimate tone). Though *Weiergang* is also a sort of semantic transliteration, it has the ungraceful and rather frightening meaning 'mighty and rigid', like a man boasting of his prowess. The former defeated the latter in marketing terms as well as in a lawsuit about intellectual property rights relating to trademarks. Both names are semantic transliterations, but at different levels, and the outcome has been the victory of a graceful translation over a vulgar one. If borrowers think carefully enough, they will be able to create excellent phono-semantic loanwords.

The advantages of phono-semantic loanwords

Such loanwords are well received, incorporating as they do the advantages of transliteration and free translation. They echo the sound of the original English word and give an indication of its meaning, filling in the semantic blank left by pure transliteration. For example, when 'media' was transliterated as *meidiya* it sounded like a foreign geographical name, but its current form *meiti* clearly means 'an agent for news'.

Phonosemantic loanwords restrain randomness in borrowing, avoid the trouble of one English word leading to several Chinese words, and clear away obstacles to automatic information processing. They also evoke desirable associations, provide semantic increments, and promote economic benefits and social effects.

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Take Coca-Cola for example. The Chinese name *Kekou Kele* ('delicious and enjoyable') adds value to the American brand, and has helped make it a best-selling beverage in China. Furthermore, *kele* has gone on to become a noun for 'soft drinks of the soda kind'. By analogy a series of parallel commodities has emerged: *Baishi Kele* (Pepsi-Cola: 'a hundred happy things'), *Wanshi kele* ('ten thousand happy things'), *Jiankang kele* ('healthy and enjoyable'), and so on.

Such loanwords add new meanings to some characters, form new morphemes and word parts, and as a result enrich Chinese vocabulary. Examples include: *dishi* ('taxi'), leading on to *dige* ('taxi driver'), *di-jie* ('woman taxi-driver'), *da di* ('take a taxi'), and *main-di* ('minibus taxi'); and *jiu-ba* ('wine bar'), leading on to *shui-ba* ('water bar'), *yang-ba* ('oxygen bar'), *wang-ba* ('internet bar'), and so forth. There is also an unexpected bonus: such forms are easy for Westerners to learn and remember, which is favorable to teaching Chinese to speakers of other languages. Forms like these also provide etymological researchers with clues that make it easy to get to the root of words. In addition, semantic transliteration symbolizes the broad-mindedness of the Chinese nation in terms of absorbing alien cultures, a courtesy that is rewarded by Western nations. All in all, I hope that from now on we will make use of the strong points of Chinese in the process of globalization and create more and more loanwords through semantic transliteration. ■

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