

## The Famous Sími or The Myth of International Words

This page isn't so much of a lesson or lecture, rather an attempt at making us think about borrowing words from more than just one perspective. And before I even start, there is no "answer".

The question of loanword vs neologism is something we have all come across. No matter what language(s) we speak. Simply because as long as a language is alive, the culture it is connected with changes as nothing in human culture is static unless dead. We invent things, we introduce new things, some things become obsolete and die out, someone else introduces a new thing ... there are many ways. Think about it - Shakespeare didn't have a word for Pokemon or desktop and Goethe didn't know what an [Auspuff](#) is (German for an exhaust) - simply because they didn't exist.

We constantly re-arrange our language to fit our communicative needs, both on a personal level and on a collective one. Human language is uniquely adapted for this task - because we inherit from our environment a set of rules of how to put words together, but not a finite set of phrases. So once we have mastered these rules, we can express a limitless number of things. It's like maths, you could try to learn all the possible additions there are and get nowhere - or you could learn the rules of addition and be able to do any addition that comes your way, no matter how big or small the numbers.

So why should you be interested in all this? Well, the thing is, there are essentially two ways of dealing with this business of describing a changing environment with words and both are equally valid and controversial.

A language can either deal with a new concept, say a technological innovation, by using the native repertoire of words or borrow words from a different language.

Let's look at the first way of dealing with this technological innovation, because there is more than one way. You can either take an old word or even an obsolete one (ie a dead one) and simply re-apply it to the new gadget. It's not as uncommon as you may think - here's some examples (all 'real life examples' i.e. not simply new creations but words used in the everyday language):

<a href="#">sími</a>	a (formerly) obsolete word for a certain type of fishing line in Icelandic	> telephone
<a href="#">waka</a>	the Māori word for a canoe, which in most urban settings has come to mean	> car
<a href="#">aizkora</a>	a Basque word which literally means 'hardstone' - a very old term for stone adzes which, when people started using metal instead of stone simply moved on to mean	> axe
<a href="#">clò-bhualadh</a>	'hitting of cloth' - the original context of this word having been cloth-printing, now generalised to mean	> printing
<a href="#">Aufrüstung</a>	a German word which originally referred to a knight putting on his suit of armour	> armament
<a href="#">book</a>	derived from an old Germanic word <a href="#">bōks</a> which means 'beech' - as the only writing the ancient Germans knew was done on rune-sticks made from beech, they simply transferred the word when 'real books' as we know them came in	> book

**Buchstabe** based on the above **bōks** and **stabi**, a 'stick' - again referring to the above rune-sticks, this word has been transferred to mean a > letter (of the alphabet)

And so on.

So what else can we do? A language can form a new compound, which describes the use or function of this new concept. Here's some more real life examples:

**béesh be hane'é** a lovely Navajo word which literally translates as 'instrument, with it talking takes place' > telephone

**Fernseher** German for 'far viewer' or in other words a > television

**timmisartok** Greenlandic, and one of those few words of which we know when it was born - it is part of a longer phrase meaning 'to fly like a bird (without flapping its wings)' - born in 1927 when Lindbergh flew over Greenland in an > airplane

**lightbulb** yep, the thing you plant if you like spring flowers, modified by <light> so you know which one to put where > lightbulb

**garagardo** 'barley wine' - as the Basques had long cultivated vines and faced with this new-fangled Germanic drink, they decided this was an appropriate term for > beer

**milá ḥaska** 'long knife' - a word that conjures up bad memories for the Dakota, as it hails back to their first encounters with the Americans, who were sporting bayonets and came to mean simply an > American soldier

**šuka waka** another Dakota word literally translating as 'mysterious dog' - as dogs had been the main animal of burden, this was deemed appropriate for a > horse

The list is long.

And then there is the other way - borrowing words. Just a few examples:

**ketchup** English, from the Cantonese for 'tomato sauce' < **ké jāp**

**langasaid** Gaelic, from Scots <lang seat> which in turn is most likely based on French **chaise longue** - a < lang seat  
< chaise longue

**Schässloh** This time Bavarian for a settee, but again based on French **chaise longue** - a 'long seat' < **chaise longue**

**līp** Going the other way round, this is an English word borrowed into Cantonese - anybody guess what it means? It's a lift. How on earth? Easy - Cantonese does not have consonant clusters such as <ft> and the closest thing it has to final -f is final -p, hence **līp** < lift

**kiosk** Wonderful word-journey. Originally from Persian **kūšk** 'a palace' to Turkish **köşk** a pavillion to French **kiosque** and ultimately to English. < **kūšk**

**bilasáana** Navajo for an 'apple' from Spanish < **manzana**

<b>sofutō</b>	Japanese. Go on, guess what it means and where it comes from ... it's Japanese for 'software'. How? Easy. Japanese words must have a CVCV structure - so you stick in extra vowels to begin with. But then you'd get *sofutowaro, much too long, so you shorten it to <b>sofutō</b>	< software
<b>gaapaaso'ob</b>	Maya for glasses. Yes, from Spanish, good guess. The underlying word is <b>gafas</b> and since Maya doesn't have an <f> it replaces it with <p> and sticks a plural ending <b>o'ob</b> on - even though <b>gafas</b> already is plural. No, not weird, see below ...	< gafas
<b>cherry</b>	Originally a mass noun in Norman French <b>cherise</b> . This got borrowed as [tʃɛxiːz] to begin with, but then people (wrongly) decided the -[iːz] obviously must be plural (cf house [haus] houses [hausiz]), so singular must be <cherry>.	< cherise

Enough of the linguistic trivia, where is the point? The first point is that all living languages do a bit of everything when having to deal with new concepts.

But if this is such a common thing, that is, borrowing and creating new words, why is this such a contentious issue? It's a question of power and numbers.

When you have language X and it borrows a few words from language Y, that generally doesn't pose a problem. Given enough time, the borrowed term will get adjusted to fit the general patterns of that language. Think of the example with **lip** in Cantonese. it took the English word and whittled it down until it fit the Cantonese sound structure. So the language is a word richer and no harm has been done to either language.

Problems appear when this "healthy" equilibrium gets upset. For example, if the cultural/technological differences between these two language communities are vast, then the language on the receiving end is faced with a difficult choice: how to cope with potentially huge numbers of new words, words which in many cases do not fit easily into that language. Do you adjust these en masse? You won't have the leisure to adjust a few dozen words over a period of several years - you may be faced with thousands of them. You will probably need some body of people who sits down to do this deliberately ... but then how do you spread them? And since they aren't built on a general consensus anymore, not everyone will agree.

This issue goes even deeper because in the right set of circumstances, your community may become bilingual. And one of the funny things that happen in such communities is that younger people who are fluent in both languages tend to reject these "adjusted" words because they "know how to say them properly". A good example from Gaelic is **cana**. This is a loanword which has added a schwa [kanə] at the end to make it "fit better" and avoid messy issues about the genitive case. As a word it was fairly successful and had wide circulation until the younger population began to switch from predominantly Gaelic speakers to predominantly English speakers. Suddenly this was a "marked" term, a clear loan which had had a Gaelic facelift ... because Gaels couldn't say the word properly maybe? And suddenly younger people, conscious of this word to some degree start saying [kan] or start using the purely English term [kæn] to use a more "neutral" term. But the much more thorny issue is that borrowing a large number of words without "adjusting" them can wreak havoc on the borrowing language's structure. Turkish is a good example of such a language.

Turkish has a fascinating feature called vowel harmony - which means that certain vowels may only be grouped with certain other vowels. In the Turkish case this means that only the front vowels i, e, ö and ü are allowed in any single word - or alternatively only the four back vowels of Turkish u, o, a and ı. For example, in the word [çiçek](#) 'flower' all vowels are front. In the word [yoğurt](#) 'yoghurt' on the other hand, all vowels are back. Based on that, all Turkish endings have two variants, one with a back vowel and one with a front vowel; so the plural of the above words is [çiçekler](#) and [yoğurtlar](#).

In come the words hotel, taxi, doctor and telephone. Doktor is an obvious choice, because it already happens to conform with Turkish vowel harmony, but what about the others? None of them conform ... and this batch ultimately got borrowed as [otel](#), [taksi](#) and [telefon](#), violating Turkish vowel harmony. So what you might ask and to an extent that is a legitimate question. The issue of having to pick an ending - should it be [taksiler](#) or [taksilar](#)? - aside it doesn't hinder people from communicating in Turkish. But you are breaking what is one of the major rules of Turkish phonology and the question every language community has to decide for itself is how much of this it can and will accept.

Now Gaelic doesn't have vowel harmony, but it has a number of other things which are "big" rules regarding the sound system. Stress for example, which in Gaelic may only occur on the first syllable except in two other clearly defined cases - close compound nouns (eg [MacDhòmhnail](#)) and a small group of adverbs (eg [a-mach](#)). Faced with English loans, this creates a dilemma for Gaelic - because in English stress can practically occur anywhere in a word - [banána](#), [pérmít](#), [pérmít](#), [hydrochlóric](#) and so on. Do you apply the Gaelic rule throughout when borrowing a word and get [[ˈbʌnana](#)] or do you retain the English stress pattern and initiate major change in Gaelic phonology? The problem is that it won't just be one or two words once you start down this route. What about Gaelic reducing unstressed vowels or not allowing dental [t](#) followed by [i] and [e] vowels?

Simply saying that we will replace every loanword with a native neologism isn't practical - the Gaelic world doesn't have the mechanisms to distribute such terms to lots of people and help them use the new terms the way it happens in Iceland where hardly any loanwords are taken on and instead, after a public discourse, Icelandic terms are coined or resurrected. So what do we do? Which rules do we keep? How much do we want to stretch them? How much should we stretch them?

What's needed here is really a healthy discourse between people who are willing to look at the complexity of Gaelic and build a workable framework, a roadmap as to how we want to deal with this issue and then apply it. Ad-hoc rendering of English words into what appears to be a Gaelic "version" won't do really. Neither will burrowing one's head in the sand with the excuse that "Gaels never had microwaves" ... neither did English speaking people until 1954. Or that X is an "international word" - there is no such thing because for every language that has borrowed the word telephone you can cite another which hasn't because the word is just unworkable in that language. German has [Telefon](#), Cantonese has [dihn wá](#) because Cantonese words just can't have more than one syllable. Spanish has [teléfono](#) and Cheyenne has [ase-éestsestotse](#) because [\\*tehepon](#) (Cheyenne has no r, f or diphthongs) just doesn't roll off the tongue.

And of course, as we often forget, new words only sound off to us because we are consciously aware of the fact that they are new - but once the young generation learns them, they become words which are "just there" like any other ... to us "freedom fries" just sounds silly, but if people continue to use this word, it'll just be "the series of sounds by which we call them fried potato thingies" for the next fast food generation ...

"Meditate on this I will" as Master Yoda says ...