



## INTRODUZIONE/INTRODUCTION

# More than Just Borrowings: the Cultural and Symbolic Significance of Loanwords

FEDERICO SALVAGGIO

Loanwords can be broadly defined as words “that at some point in the history of a language entered its lexicon as a result of borrowing” (Haspelmath 2009, 36). Those words are generally divided into two main groups: cultural borrowings and core borrowings. The first group is made up by loanwords that designate new concepts or new items coming from outside. They are often referred to as ‘loanwords by necessity’ although, as noted by Haspelmath, there is nothing intrinsically necessary in them since “All languages have sufficient creative resources to make up new words for new concepts” (Haspelmath 2009, 46). As for the second group, it is composed by words that duplicate or replace terms already existing in the recipient language. Justifying the underlying reasons behind the adoption of core borrowings is even harder than in the case of cultural borrowing since it is inevitably connected with the question of “Why should speakers use a word from another language if they have a perfectly good word for the same concept in their own language?” (Haspelmath 2009, 48). The prestige associated with certain languages and the cultural influence those languages exert on other languages are undoubtedly among the most important factors that trigger the borrowing process. Conversely, loanwords can help us “estimate the rôle which various peoples have played in the development and spread of cultural ideas by taking note of the extent to which their vocabularies have filtered into those of other peoples” (Sapir 2014, 206-7). Among world languages, five in particular are mentioned by Sapir for their “over-whelming significance as carriers of culture”: classical Chinese, Sanskrit, Arabic, Greek, and Latin (Sapir 2014, 207). In the case of Chinese, he argues that “an educated Japanese can hardly frame a single literary sentence without the use of Chinese resources” (Sapir 2014, 207). The same could be said about Sanskrit loanwords in languages like Hindi and Bengali or Arabic borrowings in Pashto and Urdu (Salvaggio 2020, 159-61).

The last two languages mentioned, Pashto and Urdu, fall into Bausani’s category of ‘Islamic languages’. For the Italian scholar an ‘Islamic language’ is a language “deeply influenced”, especially on the lexical level, “by the great cultural languages of Islam: Arabic and Persian” (Bausani 1975, 113). What is relevant to our discussion is that, in Bausani’s view, the common linguistic superstratum, acquired by ‘Islamic languages’ from Arabic (or Persian), may influence the way in which the Muslim communities involved perceive their own linguistic identity and categorize their languages in terms of affiliation to specific linguistic areas. Moreover, in his opinion, the presence of this shared ‘Islamic’ vocabulary ends up leading to the conception of “the basic, cultural,



non-ethnic ‘unity’ of all Muslim languages” that “though not clearly expressed, is certainly present in the consciousness of Muslim peoples” (Bausani 1975, 112). There are indeed some cases though where the idea of the existence of an ‘Islamic language family’, to which some languages belong (while others don’t), has indeed found quite a vocal expression within the Islamic world. In the following passage the Malaysian philosopher Al-Attas explicitly refers to the semantic role played by Arabic loanwords in the creation of a specific linguistic cultural family:

In the languages of Muslim peoples, including Arabic, there is a basic vocabulary consisting of key terms which govern the interpretation of the Islamic vision of reality and truth, and which project the worldview of Islam in correct perspective. Because the words that comprise this basic vocabulary have their origin in the Holy Qur’ān these words are naturally in Arabic, and are deployed uniformly in all Muslim languages, reflecting the intellectual and the spiritual unity of the Muslims throughout the world. [...] In this way, each language of a Muslim people with every other has in common this Islamic basic vocabulary as its own basic vocabulary; and as such all languages of Muslim peoples indeed belong to the same family of Islamic languages (Al-Attas 2005, 34-5).

The borrowing process illustrated above is described by Gardet as a process of “arabisation spirituelle” (Gardet 1977, 61) through which even those peoples

pour lesquels l’arabe resta et reste langue étrangère, importée, pour lesquels l’expression arabe est la traduction d’une pensée primitivement non arabe, ne purent pas ne pas s’arabiser malgré tout, par la prière liturgique et la méditation du Coran, et *surtout peut-être par l’apport du vocabulaire* (Gardet 1977, 63, italics ours).

Moreover, within the post-Partition Pakistani debate about the choice of a language for the newly established state “the degree of ‘Islamicity’ of a specific language” was systematically “invoked as a major criterion to establish its suitability as a candidate to the role of national language of the ‘land of the pure’” and assessed, also, on the basis of the presence of Arabic loanwords and absence of Sanskrit ones (Salvaggio 2020, 151-2).

This idea of an ‘Islamic language family’ conceived of as a sort of culture-based *Sprachbund*, mainly grounded on lexico-semantic convergences, finds a parallel in the concept of a ‘European language family’ where again the borrowing process plays a crucial role:

Europe has achieved such a far reaching *kulturelle Sprachverwandtschaft* through centuries of internal cultural commerce. Present European thought habits and thought patterns reveal a striking unity of linguistic spirit. The differences of grammatical structure within the European community of languages did not prevent the appearance of *lexical-contextual* and *idiomatic cross-borrowings* which modulated even individual language structures (Stetkevych 1970, 118-9; italics ours).

The remarks above should be sufficient to suggest the idea that there is more to loanwords than what meets the eye. In fact, the study of borrowings is essential to establish directions of cultural influence and to investigate the process of adoption,



reformulation, and even rejection of concepts and ideas coming from outside. In addition to that, it is critical for the exploration of the complex dynamics related to the self-representation of linguistic communities in terms of identity and belonging. On the basis of these premises, the present special number explores the circulation of loanwords across the Mediterranean as a means of transmission of transcultural conceptualizations and semantization strategies. Following the routes of different borrowings through the Mediterranean, scholars and researchers of Islamic and Linguistic studies deal with how language contact in the Mediterranean acts as a carrier of ideas and concepts thus contributing to the shaping of shared semantic spaces between different European, African, and Asian areas of the Mediterranean. Tackling cultural transmission via loanwords from different perspectives, the following contributions investigate linguistic and cultural links between distinct, Islamic and non-Islamic, areas of medieval, modern and contemporary Mediterranean.

Giuseppe Cecere (University of Bologna, IT) discusses *mamlūk* wanderings in European dictionaries as a way to explore the processes of representation and categorisation of the ‘others’ in the concerned societies. Roberto Dapit (University of Udine, IT), by looking at Turcisms in Slovenian, demonstrates how loanwords can undergo a process of semantic degradation that reflects attitudes of exclusion in the face of certain elements of otherness. Hilal Oytun Altun (Jagiellonian University, PL) explores the complex trajectories through which Italian loanwords entered the Turkish vocabulary. Matthias Kappler and Stefano Pellò (Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, IT) present the peculiar case of the glossonym *fārsī* borrowed in Modern Greek to convey the idea of language proficiency. Francesco Grande (University of Turin, IT) investigates the transmission and circulation of lexicographical knowledge concerning the terminological pair ‘Adnān/Qaḥṭān from Middle East to al-Andalus. Francesca Gorgoni (University of Haifa, ISR) proposes a review of the book *Saggio di lessicografia filosofica araba* (Zonta 2014) that represents the latest intellectual legacy of the renowned Italian scholar in Jewish and Arabic philosophy Mauro Zonta (d. 2017).

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