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## **The Contribution of Languages of Muslim-Majority Speakers to English Vocabulary**

### **Abstract**

The English language owes a debt of gratitude to numerous languages, those with whom the British colonizers came into contact through colonization and trade, and also with those whose languages are spoken by a large number of people. Examples of the former are Bengali, Hindi, Hausa, Malay and Urdu. The examples of the latter are Arabic, Mandarin, Persian and Turkish. When we think of the Muslim contribution to the vocabulary of English, it is mostly Arabic, Persian and Turkish that comes to one's mind. Not much is known about the lexical items from Swahili, Fulani, Wolof and Tatar, for instance. This study is an attempt to discover the various vocabulary items from languages of Muslim-majority speakers that have found their way into the international lingua franca and thus used internationally and regionally. Their use is authenticated through influential dictionaries and online content. A sizeable number of such words have indeed become part of English and are used in the print and electronic media. These words, though from the sources of Muslim-majority languages are used by both speakers who use English as their primary and secondary language. These words fill a lexical gap experienced in the English language which has only become richer, not poorer, by lexical borrowing of the languages in question.

**Key words:** Lexical Borrowing, Muslim-Majority Languages, Loan Words, Lexical Gap

### **Introduction**

English has always been an international language of sorts ever since the speakers of old English came into contact with people from outside England who came to colonize them, and later when England herself went on to conquer other territories and established an empire on which the sun never set. Trading in products, involvement in the local affairs of administration and exposure to new ideas and way of life have mutually enriched English and the languages the English colonizers, missionaries and traders came into contact with. The French influence on English has been substantial (see American Heritage Dictionary, 1996).

While many are aware that English has benefited enormously from Latin, Greek and Latinate modern languages such as Spanish and Italian (Palumbo and Gaik, 1992), the

contribution of speakers of Muslim-majority languages, with the exception of Arabic, has not been well-researched, to the present researchers' knowledge.

Palumbo and Gaik (1992: 213) state that foreign words which enter the English language "are classified according to their degree of foreignness.....four categories: natural, denizen, alien and casual". Naturals are those foreign words which have become fully naturalized in pronunciation and use, for example, imam. Denizens keep their form and foreign pronunciations, but are used like native words, for example, 'kebab' in The kebabs sold there are delicious and filling. Aliens refer to foreign titles, names of items and other words that speakers of English may find themselves having to use, for example, 'sultan' in The sultan of Oman visited Omani students in Cardiff. Casuals are similar to aliens, but they are less commonly used, for example, iftar as in The Muslim members of parliament attended the

iftar gathering hosted by the Indian premier. Another example is niqab as in The wearing of niqab has been banned in France.

The entries in this study may be considered as vocabulary for an international cross-cultural English language. They are for a new world where multicultural English is increasingly becoming popular as these are used by a vast population in both Muslim and non-Muslim majority countries. Those who have newly converted to Islam find themselves using those expressions related to their new religion and culture to express their new identity.

The vocabulary identified here has enriched the English language immeasurably, a truly global lingua franca. Users of the language from Australia to Zimbabwe use these expressions in various domains, including arts, sciences, history, politics, business, economics, law, etc. They are needed for cross-cultural understanding, and to better understand cultural and linguistic diversity.

### Background

Students and language educators are all too familiar with the substantial contribution made by Arabic to English vocabulary. What many laypeople may not be aware of is the significant contribution made by Persian, Turkish, Malay, Urdu and a number of languages of Muslim-majority speakers. These have been used in various ways by users of English. These words are also employed in a non-religious and non-cultural sense. For example, *jihad* is often used in a restricted way. But, it can also be used in the sense of a campaign as in *The mayor declared a jihad against corruption*. There are English language users who use borrowed or loan words creatively. For example: *When are you going to get out of your self-imposed purdah?* These add color and universality to the language.

### Objectives

The primary objective of this paper is to reveal the contribution of Muslim-majority languages to English vocabulary. Although one may know there are many English words in other Muslim-majority languages such as Malay as used in

some countries in Southeast Asia, English has also been introduced to languages used by Muslims from other parts of the world. The primary objective is to show to the world the numerous words in the languages of Muslims which have found their way into English as well and help to build bridges between Muslim and English users of the language.

### Methodology

The methodology pursued here follows that of Cannon (1994), whereby books, dictionaries, CD-ROM and the internet were used to trace the Arabic words in English for his study.. For the present study, the books used were *The Arabic Contributions to the English Language* by Cannon (1994) and *Word Origins Second Edition* by John Ayto (2005). The dictionaries were *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language Third Edition* (printed version, 1996) together with the fourth edition of the electronic version of the dictionary of 2007,

*The Oxford Reference Dictionary* (1986), *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* (1995), which was primarily used to help construct sample sentences with the target entries. *Collins English Dictionary* (2000), and *Webster's New Explorer Encyclopedic Dictionary* (2006).

The electronic dictionaries were *The American Heritage Dictionary* (2007), *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* (1913), *The Concise Grove Dictionary of Art* (2002), *Oxford Grove Music Encyclopedia* (1994), *McGraw Hill Science & Technology Dictionary* (2003), *Oxford Dictionary of Archaeology* (2003), *Oxford Food and Fitness Dictionary* (2003), *Oxford Food and Nutrition Dictionary* (2005), *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2011), *Columbia Encyclopedia 6<sup>th</sup> edition* (2011), *Gale Encyclopedia of Russian History* (2004), *Gale Encyclopedia of the Early Modern World* (2004), *New World Encyclopedia* (2011) and *Merriam-Webster* (2011). *Answers.com* proved a very big help to locate used to help to locate the target words and vital information pertaining to them. *Wikipedia*, the free encyclopedia proved a valuable resource providing lists of English words whose origin

could be traced to Muslim-majority languages. The words, however, were cross checked with print and online sources for their veracity and authenticity. The CD-ROM used for the study was that of the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2003).

The criteria for considering the target words as contribution are: 1. They are entries in major dictionaries used worldwide, 2. Their etymology includes Muslim-majority languages and 3. They have entered English vocabulary directly or indirectly. Only words which are used in a wider region have been included here. Those which are used in limited national contexts and purely used by Muslims in a religious context are not considered a target contribution to the English lexicon, for example, Id-ul-fitr, Hashemite, rial, Hubshee, Omani, Shawwal, afernan, dhikir, sahib, aga, ban and durgah. The words selected for our purpose are common nouns.

Proper nouns, especially those referring to names of specific countries, cities or locations will not be considered a contribution. Only words which are regarded as having a role to play in general international English have been identified and dealt with. They are part of the active and passive vocabulary of educated English speakers. Words which specifically belong to and are restricted to non-native varieties of English have been excluded. The target word is treated in quite a number of sources used for the study, but only those words, whose contribution was substantial, have been listed. Some of these words may be used in an additional sense, besides pertaining more closely to that of Muslims.

For example, 'jihad' can be used strictly as relevant to Muslims as in The Afghan mujahideen considered it a jihad to oppose the Russian invasion. An example which can be used by more English users is The newly appointed police chief considered it his jihad and responsibility to fight criminals in the city. This is the authors' additional contribution to the field to enable as many people as possible to use these words more extensively (more in forthcoming book). The target words are all found in authentic materials: online material, newspapers, books and dictionaries.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **Arabic**

The Arabic language is the language of Muslim-majority speakers which has contributed the most number of words to the English language in comparison to other languages spoken by Muslims. The Arabic language is very closely associated with Muslims all over the world. It is the language of the Holy Quran. It is a rich language which has enriched many languages of Muslim-majority and minority speakers. These include Berber, Hausa, Swahili, Somali, Hindi, Gujarati, Bengali, Malay (Beg, 1979).

It has also supplied words in a big way to European languages such as Italian, Spanish, French and Portuguese (Cannon, 1994). Muslim communities worldwide use Arabic expressions frequently in the domains of religion and culture. Watt Taylor (1933, cited in Beg, 1979) had claimed that Arabic loan words in English were about a thousand in number, not including derivatives. The contribution of about a thousand words, albeit through other sources, is a very significant contribution. Some of these words, however, may have now become dated, obsolete or hardly used. The present work has included only those which have found their way into current, contemporary and authoritative dictionaries.

The Arabic loanwords identified here are mostly on the basis of entries found in Garland Cannon (1994), *The Arabic Contributions to the English Language*. 202 words in English have been identified to have benefited from Arabic, making it the largest contributor among the Muslim-majority languages. This is not surprising as Arabs had been great seafarers, traders, scholars and conquerors. This had enabled them to interact with other peoples, and to pass on some of their words, probably to fill a lexical gap in their lexicon.

Their vocabulary has remained steadfast among Muslims, mostly in the religious and cultural domains. The following words were identified for our purpose: abaya, abelmosk, abutilon, acequia, acerola, Achnar, admiral, adobe, afreet, albacore, albatross, alchemy, alcohol,

alcove, Aldebaran, alembic, alfalfa, alfilaria, alforja, algarobba, algebra, Algol, algorithm, alidale, alkali, almanac, Altair, amalgam, amber, aniline, apricot, arsenal, arsenic, artichoke, assassin, assegai, average, ayatollah, azan, azimuth, azoth, balm, barbican, barrio, Bedouin, ben, benzoin, berseem, brinjal, burqa, bulbul, calabash, caliber, caliph, camel, camphor, candy, cane, carafe, carat, caraway, carboy, carmine, carob, casbah, caterach, check, checkmate, cipher, civet, coffee, coral, cork, cotton, couscous, crimson, cumin, damask, damson, date, Deneb, dragoman, drub, elemi, elixir, emir, fakir, falafel, fedayeen, gala, garble, gazelle, genie, gerbil, ghou, giraffe, guitar, gum, gypsum, haj/j, haji, halal, hashish, hazard, hegira, henna, hijab, houri, hummus, imam, intifada, jacket, jar, jasmine, javelin, jerboa, jihad, jubbah, keffiyeh, khat, kismet, kohl, lacquer, lapis lazuli, lemon, lilac, lime, loofa, lute, macramé, magazine, marzipan, massage, mate, mattress, mecca, minaret, mocha, mohair, monkey, monsoon, mortise, mosque, muezzin, mufti, mujahideen, mullah, mummy, muslin, myrrh, nabob, nadir, nuchal, oasis, orange, popinjay, qadi, racket, realgar, ream, saffron, saker, salaam, saluki, sandal, sarsaparilla, sash, satin, senna, sequin, shahin, sharia, sheikh, simoon, sirocco, soda, sofa, souk, Sufi, sugar, sultan, syrup, tabby, tabla, talisman, tamarind, tangerine, tariff, tarragon, tuna, typhoon, ulama, ummah, vizier, xebec, zakat, zareba, zarf, zedoary, zenith and zero.

### **Bambara**

Bambara is a language spoken in Mali in West Africa. It is used by about 6 million people, including those who use it as a second language. It is the native language of the Bamabara ethnic group which is estimated to be around 4 million. It is the national language and lingua franca of Mali. Most of the people are Muslim, although many still do observe their ancestral practice of honouring their ancestors, a practice which does not observe Islamic traditions. The country had been colonized by the French (Wikipedia). Only 1 word, i.e. *juke* has been borrowed.

### **Bengali**

Bengali or Bangla is native to Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal. Bangladesh

was formerly known as East Pakistan. The vast majority of Bangladeshis are ethnic Bengalis. Nearly all of them speak Bangla as their first language. The minority Bihari population, originally from the Indian state of Bihar speaks Urdu. The major religion of the inhabitants is Islam (nearly 90%), while in neighbouring West Bengal, the people are mostly Hindu. The majority are Sunni Muslims (Wikipedia). Two words can be traced to Bengali- *bungalow* and *jute*.

### **Chechen**

The Chechens live in Chechnya, whose capital is Grozny, in the Caucasus mountainous region of the Russian Federation. They are staunch Muslims who have a long history of conflict with the Russians. Only 1 word- *aul*, may be from Chechen language.

### **Fulani / Fula**

The Fula or Fulani language is one of the languages of West Africa. The majority of the Fulani people are Muslim. They were the first group of West Africans to embrace Islam and played a pivotal role in the spread and influence Islam throughout West Africa (New World Encyclopedia, 2011). They had even established an Islamic empire. They are spread over many West African countries, for example, Nigeria, Senegal, Guinea, Cameroon, Mali and Niger (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2011). Fulani has contributed 2 words, namely, *mojo* and *yam*.

### **Hausa**

The Hausa people are the largest ethnic group in West Africa and are significantly found in Nigeria, Niger, Ghana, Chad, Togo, Benin, Burkino Faso, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire and Sudan. Hausa often serves as a lingua franca among Muslims in non-Hausa regions. An estimated 22 million people are native speakers of Hausa. They are mostly Muslim (Wikipedia). Despite British colonization in a large part of Africa, Hausa seems to have only contributed 1 word- *juju*.

### **Kazakh**

Also known as Kazak language, it is spoken largely in Kazakhstan and the Uighur Autonomous Region of Sinkiang in China. They were a traditionally pastoral people who

now practice settled agriculture (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2011). The 2 words from this source are *saxaul* and *barchan*.

### **Malay**

The Malay language is a general term to include the languages spoken by the Malay people in Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei and Singapore. There are varieties of Malay, however. In Malaysia it is known as Bahasa Malaysia, in Brunei, Bahasa Brunei and in Indonesia, it is Bahasa Indonesia. These show variation in orthography and vocabulary. There are standardized forms as well as creole and pidgin forms. Most Malays in the Malay regions are Muslim. Some languages and the people in Indonesia have their own distinctiveness, for example, the Javanese. Malay is spoken as the primary language by more than 33 million people in the Malay world (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2011).

### **Javanese**

The Javanese are an ethnic group of people who originate from Java, the most populous and influential island in Indonesia. They are the largest ethnic group in the country. Most Javanese are Muslim. They have also migrated to neighbouring countries, for example, Malaysia. The Javanese language, although closely related to other Indonesian languages, is also distinct from them. Java has had a long history of Hindu and Buddhist influences before the advent of Islam.

There is a significant contribution from the Malay language, probably 60 words. They are: *agar (agar-agar), amok (amuck), angklung, antimacassar, babirusa, bamboo, bantam, banteng, batik, binturong, cajeput, caladium, casuarina, catechu, cockatoo, compound, cooties, dammar, dugong, durian, gaharu, gambier, gamelan, gecko, gingham, godown, gong, gutta-percha, ikat, junk, kampong, kapok, ketchup, komodo dragon, kris (keris), lahar, launch, mandarin, mangosteen, orang utan, paddy, palanquin, pandanus, pangolin, pantoum, parang, rambutan, ramie, rattan, sago, salak, sambal, sarong, satay, seladang, siamang, silat, songkok, tempeh and trepang,*

### **Maldivian/ Dhivehi LANGUAGE**

Maldives is an island state near Sri Lanka and the south of India. It is very popular with holiday makers for its numerous coral islands. The people of Maldives are predominantly Muslim. The local name for their language is Dhivehi. This language has provided *atoll*.

### **Persian**

The Persian language which is also known as Farsi is the official language of Iran. There are three historical varieties of Persian- Old, Middle and Modern. Farsi is spoken in Iran and by the Iranian diaspora. Persian has had a substantial influence on Turkic languages, and has also been used in some Indian languages. For example, *tahsildar* refers to a senior Indian official at sub-district level. The word is derived from *tahsil* meaning revenue. *Bakshheesh* is used in Indian English to indicate gratuity offered to public officials to expedite and get work done. It is from Persian *bakshish* meaning 'present'. 'Tandoor' is *tandur* in Urdu which in turn came from Middle Persian *tannur* which is an oven (AHD, 2007).

The influence of Persian on other languages spoken by Muslim-majority speakers is significant. The Arab invasion of Persia witnessed a mutual exchange of vocabulary items. There are many items which are identical, for example, *fatwah* is used in both Arabic and Persian. Islam is the dominant religion of the Iranians. The majority of Iranians in the Islamic Republic of Iran are Shia Muslims. The Persian language has made its way into English, contributing 60 words. The words accounted for are as follows: *arsenic, asafetida, aubergine, azure, babul, baksheesh, bazaar, bedeguar, borax, caravan, caravansary, cassock, caviar, chador, check, checkmate, chillum, china, dervish, divan, gizzard, gul, jackal, jasmine, jasper, kenaf, kismet, lemon, magus, manticore, markhor, mezereon, mogul, musk, narghile, paradise, peach, peri, perse, pistachio, purdah, roc, scarlet, scimitar, seersucker, serendipity, sesban, shawl, sherbet (sorbet), sitar, spinach, -stan, taffeta, tambour, tapestry, Tigris, trehala, zenana, zircon and zurna.*

### **Somali**

Somali is the dominant language of the Somali people in Somalia. Ethnic Somalis are estimated to be around 15-17 million people. Besides Somalia, they are also found in large numbers in Ethiopia. The principal religion of the Somalis who are today scattered in different parts of the world is Islam (Wikipedia). Somali has provided the lone item-*gerenuk*.

### **Swahili**

The word 'Swahili' itself comes from the Arabic word *sawahil* which means 'coastal dwellers'. Kiswahili is also another name for the language. It is the most important language of East Africa which is also spoken in the central and southern regions. Regions with a significant Swahili population are Tanzania, Kenya, Mozambique and Comoros. The majority of the Swahili people are Muslim (Wikipedia). The vocabulary of Swahili is largely influenced by Arabic (Oxford Reference Dictionary, 1986). Due to its important function, it serves as the lingua franca for business activities. It is one of the most influential and well-known languages in Africa, used by a very large population. Swahili can take the credit for 3 words-*bwana*, *dengue* and *safari*.

### **Tatar**

The Tatars have a very rich history of assimilation and disintegration. They were a powerful nomadic group of people who caused panic among Europeans. These people who have settled in various parts of the Russian Federation and Eastern Europe are mostly Sunni Muslim. They are a fusion of Mongol and Turkic people and thus the Mongol invaders of Russia and Hungary became known to Europeans as Tatars or Tartars (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2011). The Tatar language may be credited with 4 words: *balalaika*, *buran*, *sevruga* and *uhlan*.

### **Turkish**

The Turkish language is a widely spoken Muslim-majority language. It is spoken across many countries outside Turkey where many people of Turkish origin have settled. These include Asian and European countries besides USA. It is influential not only because an estimated 91 million people speak the language

(Wikipedia, 2011), but also because it was used in the once powerful Ottoman Empire which straddled across Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe. 45 words from Turkish may have enriched English.

The words which have been identified are: *baklava*, *Balkan (balkanize)*, *begum*, *bosh*, *bouzouki*, *café*, *caftan*, *coffee*, *dolma*, *dolman*, *doner kebab*, *horde*, *Hun*, *kebab (kebob)*, *kefir*, *khan*, *khanate*, *kiosk*, *kismet*, *koumiss*, *lavash*, *macramé*, *martagon*, *minaret*, *odalisque*, *Ottoman*, *pasha*, *pilaf*, *sabot*, *saiga*, *saker*, *samiel*, *sherbet (sorbet)*, *shish kebab*, *taffeta*, *young Turks*, *tulip*, *turquoise*, *turban*, *vizier*, *yaourt*, *yashmak*, *yoghurt (yogurt)*, *yurt* and *zill*.

### **Urdu**

Urdu is the language of the majority Muslim population in Pakistan and north India. It is a language "allied to Hindi, which it resembles in grammar and structure, but with a large admixture of Arabic and Persian words, having been built up from the language of the early Muslim invaders, and usually written in Persian script" (Oxford Reference Dictionary, 1986: 901). There are some differences between Hindi and Urdu in vocabulary, usage and cultural context, the reason being the latter is associated more with that of Muslims. Urdu has done its part for English vocabulary with 12 words: *hookah*, *chador*, *cummerbund*, *cushy*, *khaki*, *lungi*, *mullah*, *pajamas*, *samosa*, *tabasheer*, *tandoor* and *tandoori*.

### **Wolof**

The Wolof language is the native language of the Wolof people who are largely found in Senegal, The Gambia and Mauritania. The language is spoken by more than 10 million people and the vast majority of them are followers of Islam. The single entry from Wolof is *banana*.

### **Conclusion**

It is beyond doubt the major Muslim peoples have enriched the English language. The Arabs, Persian, Turkish and Malays have made a sizeable impact on the English lexicon. They are followed by many other Muslim-majority

languages, though their contribution may have been minimal. Together they have added numerous words to the language. The semantic fields they encompass include agriculture (e.g. *noria*- a water wheel used to transfer water to an irrigation canal, AHD 1996), anatomy (e.g. *nucha*- the nape of the neck, AHD 1996: 1240), astronomy (e.g. *almanac*- an annual publication of weather forecasts), biochemistry (e.g. *amber-yellowish*- brown substance), botany (e.g. *pandanus*- screw pine), birds (e.g. *bulbul*- a songbird synonymous with a nightingale, AHD 2007), fish (e.g. *albacore*), reptiles (e.g. *Varanus*), zoology (e.g. *orang utan*), chemistry and alchemy (e.g. *elixir*), geography (e.g. *atoll*) geology (e.g. *gypsum*), mathematics (e.g. *algebra*), archaeology (e.g. *Ubaid culture* in Oxford Dictionary of Archaeology, 2003), ethnology (e.g. Bedouin) law (e.g. *khadi*), linguistics (e.g. *zero*), politics (e.g. *khanate*), sociology (e.g. *harem*), architecture (e.g. *aul*), dance (e.g. *zill*), music (e.g. *balalaika*), literature (e.g. *Sufi literature*), rugs (e.g. *abrash*), boats (e.g. *junk*), calendar (e.g. *hegira*), climate (e.g. *monsoon*), clothing (e.g. *batik*), colour (e.g. *orange*), transportation (e.g. *palanquin*), food (e.g. *yam*), drink (e.g. *sherbet*), games (e.g. *chess*), household (e.g. *mattress*), religion (e.g. *halal*), military (e.g. *mujahideen*), money (e.g. *shroff*), mythology (e.g. *manticore*), taxes (e.g. *zakat*), titles (e.g. *pasha*), weights (e.g. *carat*) and measures (e.g. *ream*).

English has not been shy to borrow words from the many language speakers it has come into contact. English and indeed many European languages have benefited linguistically from their colonial expansionism and adventures. The benefit was mutual, however. The peoples of the countries they had colonized also gained too, linguistically. Lexical borrowing has also come about due to trade and missionary activities. Borrowing from Arabic into the Malay language is very well known (see Muhammad Abdul Jabbar Beg, 1979). There are even Arabic loan words in Tagalog and Thai. The Malay language has borrowed considerably from English too as a result of British colonization and globalization (see Shamimah Mohideen, 2006).

Our languages can serve as bridges to understand each other. Some major English language dictionaries already have included words from Muslim-majority languages (Haja Mohideen, 2007). The speakers may have animosities towards one another, but languages do not disunite us. That is because the languages we use have each other's vocabulary, without us being aware of it. Communication between different individuals and nations is presently compounded by the fact that more than one language is involved in our interaction (El-dali, 2012). Therefore it has also become necessary to know what some vocabulary items of other languages in English mean, and the cultural references.

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