

'NECESSARY' AND 'UNNECESSARY' BORROWING

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This paper examines the English loanwords in an Oceanic language, Mele-Fila, with a view to asking: why are they there? The data are incomplete and in some ways unsystematic, as the question has only gradually begun to bother me in the course of a general descriptive and comparative study of the language. Still, I present some observations in order to raise some questions that as far as I know have not been considered before in the Oceanic context. Previous writers on loanwords in various Oceanic languages (e.g. Schütz 1970, 1978, Elbert 1970, Hollyman 1962, Milner 1957, Tryon 1970, Vernier 1948) have given extensive lists of words, have classified them as to source, historical period and semantic area, and analysed the phonological transformations attendant upon borrowing. By and large, however, they have taken the culture contact of the last two centuries as a general and self-evident explanation for why the words are there to begin with.

The general linguistic literature on borrowing has been based on a somewhat restricted range of data. Most of the examples used by such writers as Bloomfield (1933), Weinreich (1953) and Derooy (1956) involve borrowing among the national languages of Europe, or into the languages of minority communities in America, whether immigrant or native. Except for the spectacular phonological restructuring of loanwords in Hawaiian, Oceania has not figured in such discussions.

Mele-Fila is one of about 100 Oceanic languages spoken in the Republic of Vanuatu. Its speech community is larger than average for the area, numbering perhaps 1800 people, of whom 1200 live in Mele village, where most of my work has been done. Mele-Fila is the first language of nearly everyone in the village, and is used every day by persons of all ages, in contexts ranging from domestic intimacy to public meetings. But the presence and the influence of English, French and Bislama¹ are evident at every turn. Instruction in the two elementary schools is entirely in English or French. In the church, while M-F is commonly used in prayers, sermons and announcements, (which are locally composed), Bible readings and most hymns are in English, Bislama or the neighbouring Erakor language, since no mission translations into M-F exist. And when there is a visiting party from another village (an increasingly common event) the entire service may be in Bislama. The same switch to Bislama occurs on a variety of other occasions when visitors from outside the village are present.² Radio Vanuatu provides several hours a day of broadcasting in English, French and Bislama.³ And, of course, the many Mele people whose daily work takes them to the nearby town of Vila (whether as domestics, labourers, office workers or simply sellers of produce in the market) must use these languages for a major segment of their lives.

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Loanwords of recent origin will appear in almost any sample of Mele speech over a few sentences in length, and the number in my lexical files is in the hundreds, despite a methodological bias against them.⁴ Let's first look at a random sample of a dozen of them:

aeani <i>iron</i>	marseni <i>pill, medicine</i>	Sarerei <i>Saturday</i>
fooko <i>fork</i>	nakitae <i>necktie</i>	susaa <i>jew's harp</i>
kakau <i>cacao, cocoa</i>	peelo <i>bell</i>	taatuu <i>tattoo</i>
laemu <i>lemon, lime</i>	raisi <i>rice</i>	waea <i>wire</i>

This sample is nicely representative of the corpus in a number of respects. All but one are from English (kakau is almost certainly French, and taatuu is equivocal). In most cases it is impossible to distinguish between words borrowed directly from English, and words of English origin borrowed from Bislama, although given the relative amount of knowledge of the two, Bislama has probably been much more important as an immediate source. All the words are nouns (taatuu can also be a verb), all are concrete (except perhaps Sarerei), and all relate to new things and concepts of European introduction.

This is the common and unproblematic pattern of 'cultural borrowing'. It should be noted, however, that even loans like the above are not strictly necessary. In addition to borrowing, semantic extension of existing lexical items and creation of new lexical forms from existing material (neologism) are recognised as alternative means available to every language for dealing with novelty in the world of experience. Mele-Fila has made some use of these processes:

nifo	<i>tooth; horn (of an animal)</i>
kanukanu	<i>to decorate, make designs; to write</i>
suisui	<i>gun (from suisui to blow [v.i.]</i>
injini maanamu	<i>lawnmower (from injini engine, machine, maanamu grass)</i>
panu furufuru	<i>carpet (from panu mat, furufuru hairy)</i>

But borrowing appears to be a much more common choice. By contrast Dorais, in his recent study of the 'modern vocabulary' of the Québec-Labrador dialects of the Inuit (Eskimo) language, found that neologisms accounted for roughly 77% of the total corpus, semantic extension for 16% and borrowings for only 7% (Dorais 1978:22). One obvious explanation that comes to mind is the much more complex derivational morphology of Inuit. But Mele-Fila appears not to make much use even of such morphological resources as it has. For instance, there is a prefix *nii-* deriving nouns of instrument from verbs, as in:

niikura	<i>oven rake (from kura arrange stones in oven)</i>
niikupi	<i>throwing stick (from kupi-a knock down (fruit) with a throwing stick)</i>

The potential usefulness of such an affix can be seen from the fact that about 60% of the neologisms in Dorais' corpus described the function or use of the object (e.g. *qirng-uti (what is used for searching) telescope*). Mele-Fila, however, appears not to have used *nii-* at all to create terms for European things. Thus it appears that structural factors alone cannot account for the choice of one mechanism over another. (This point is made by Weinreich 1953:61-62.)

The inadequacy of 'need' as an explanation can also be seen from numerous cases where an earlier semantic extension or neologism has been replaced by a borrowing. Bread, for example, was apparently originally referred to as *kuau itoga foreign laplap*, since in composition, method of preparation and importance

in the diet it is fairly similar to the traditional Vanuatu food.⁵ This expression, however, is now obsolete, and the normal term is *pireete*. Miller (1971) gives similar examples from Shoshoni, such as *tuuhupa* (*black soup*) *coffee*, being replaced by *koppi*.

One can suggest a number of reasons why, in the absence of a self-conscious 'purist' movement, there should be a universal tendency to replace neologisms or extensions with loanwords. In general, neologisms will be polymorphemic and hence longer than monomorphemic borrowed forms. Mithun and Chafe (1979:30) give the rather extreme example of Mohawk *iontewennata'ahstakhwa'* (*one uses it for inserting the voice*) *telephone*, cited by native speakers as evidence of the inconvenience of Mohawk for dealing with the modern world.

Extensions are also vulnerable to replacement because, by definition, they ignore a distinction which is lexicalised in the donor language. To the highly bilingual speaker, such a non-distinction may even be embarrassing: "It's really *bread*, of course, but we call it 'laplap'!" It may also be that increasing familiarity with, and adoption of, the new culture makes speakers more aware of differences, e.g. between *bread* and *laplap*, where previously a broad similarity had been perceived (Weinreich 1953:59).⁶

So far the examples considered have all fallen within the semantic area of recent innovations of European origin. To turn our attention to some examples outside this area immediately raises the question of what is 'new' and what is not. Despite the manifest physical differences between Europeans and Melanesians, I do not know of any cases of new body-part terms being borrowed or coined to refer to European skin, hair, eyes, etc. Such categories of material culture as *knife* and *house* are carried over without lexical innovation, despite important differences between the European and Melanesian versions of such things. The differences, therefore, are not a sufficient explanation when borrowing does take place. The difference between work as a social institution in European and Melanesian society, for example, is not in itself enough to account for some people's use of *wooka* instead of the indigenous word *wesiwesi*. One might speculate that *wooka* would be introduced with the specialised meaning *work for wages*, while *wesiwesi* would be applied to work on one's own house or garden, etc. I do not have enough data to say whether there is any such tendency; but my (middle-aged) informants, at least, did not perceive it that way. They rather condemned *wooka* as an abusive borrowing, when a perfectly good indigenous synonym existed. Nor will the obvious differences explain why *niisara broom* is now less common than *puroomu*.

Newness may be as much a new way of thinking about existing things as a new thing. The words *Niuepiritis New Hebrides* and *kastomu traditional culture* are frequently heard in modern discussions in Mele, but have no equivalent indigenous expressions, since there was previously no notion of a local group of islands distinguished from the rest of the world, or of traditional culture as opposed to modern ways.

In some cases it appears that borrowing may be brought about by a concept that is not necessarily new, but has not been conveniently lexicalised in the language before. Haiman (1979:84) mentions a number of examples where *Hua* (spoken in the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea) has borrowed an apparently 'unnecessary' word from Tok Pisin, apparently because it provides a general term where the language had previously had only a set of more specialised words. Thus *opim* (hu) *open* (v.t.) covers a semantic range previously inhabited by "a half-

dozen verbs for various kinds of opening". The same pattern appears in the Mele waase *wash* and kuuku *cook* (v.t.). In both cases, culture contact not only expanded the range of techniques, but also provided a general term to go with the various specifics (e.g. taona *cook in earth oven*, tuunaa *grill*, noopaa *steam*, faraeni *fry*, etc.).

One effect of this adoption of general terms may be confusion and eventual loss of the specialised terms. Haiman notes that this often happens in Hua (1979:85). Weinreich (1953:54) suggests that such confusion may take place even without actual borrowing simply through interference in the speech of bilinguals. The eventual loss of these terms would leave a later investigator with the impression that no indigenous lexical items had existed in the domain. Something like this may account for the persistence of the word storii *story* in Mele. Informants claim that atara matua is the proper Mele expression, but this is much more general, atara meaning *language, words, speech*, and matua *old*. Evidence from other Polynesian languages would lead one to expect two or three words for different types of traditional narrative, and it seems at least possible that these may have been lost, along with other specialised vocabulary, in the severe erosion of Mele's traditional culture in the last hundred years.

Some other words appear to have filled lexical gaps other than the lack of a generalising term. (Perhaps it would be less teleological to say that they seem to have taken up residence in previously uninhabited areas of semantic space.) I have been unable to elicit any indigenous Mele term translating *learn*, for which laeni is used. The modal mas *must* conveys a sense of obligation which seems to have been difficult to express in the old language — the convenient expressions being a verb particle covering anything from imperative to statement of future plans, and a higher verb meaning *it is good that...* Impotene *important* seems to be a usefully specific term within areas like *big* and *heavy*.

Bloomfield divided all borrowing between distinct languages (that is, other than dialect borrowing) into 'cultural' and 'intimate'. Any borrowing beyond the semantic sphere of 'cultural novelties' could take place only in a situation where the donor language was socially dominant over the receptor. Nineteenth-century linguists might have been comfortable talking about the 'superiority' of the dominant language; modern writers would rather stress its 'prestige'. But if this asymmetry were sufficient as an explanation, one would expect borrowings to be randomly distributed throughout the lexicon. This seems not to be the case.

The closest thing to such a 'prestige' field-effect is the apparent clustering of loans whose content is, strictly speaking, non-novel, in areas of association with Europeans: school, wage labour, the money economy, and politics. The small sample on which this paper is mainly based includes sapote *support*, joeni *join* and mempa *member* in the organisational sphere; salemu *sell*, puuaa *poor* and riiji *rich* in the economic. One could answer that these are all or mainly in fact new concepts, except that informants offer Mele synonyms, suggesting that at least some closely related notion existed in pre-European times. It is also probably not a coincidence that kuuku and waase, mentioned above, are among the most common domestic tasks performed by Melanesians for Europeans.

The clearest example of this effect, however, and one which is apparently much more widespread than Mele, is the numerals. Although Mele has a decimal number system capable in theory of reckoning at least into the tens of thousands, the indigenous numerals are rarely used beyond about five, and then mainly by older persons attempting to be formally correct. Some adolescents do not even know the higher numerals. Clearly the reason for this is the much greater European emphasis on counting and reckoning, particularly with regard to time and

money, reinforced by daily teaching in the schools. These two areas, in fact, have probably always been reckoned solely in English. Certainly one says *tu kalooko* and not **rua kalooko* for *two o'clock*. This is probably the reason why *taemu time* is apparently replacing the native word *malo*, though one can still say either *temalo afa?* or *t'taemu afa? what time is it?*

Above ten, the Mele numerals are probably also disfavoured by the 'mechanical factor' mentioned above — that of simply being longer and hence less convenient than their competitors. This factor has been exaggerated by some writers — surely the difference in length between *hitten* and *schlagen* (Clyne 1967:79) could not in itself bring about a systematic preference for the former — but a Mele expression like *mijikao eerua antuuma gafuru eeono antuuma eefaa 264* is clearly at a disadvantage relative to *tu anreti sikisti foaa*.

A final group of words does not seem to be much like any of those previously considered, but finds parallels in many other languages. The 'connectives' *ale*, *nao* and *oraet*, roughly translatable by *well...*, *so...* or *then...* are conspicuous in narrative, even traditional stories told by older speakers who were making a conscious effort to avoid English borrowings. Hill and Hill (1977:62) mention hesitation forms and connectives (such as *entonces then*, *hasta until*) as among the most common Hispanicisms in their Nahuatl texts; similar words (*well, anyway, you know, you see*) are common in the speech of Clyne's German-speaking Australians (1967:75-76).

Many mysteries remain. Among my favourites are *staa*ji *start*, one of the most common, for which *tuulake* appears to be a perfect semantic and grammatical equivalent; *insai*ji (Mele *iroto*) *inside*; and *au*ji *come/go out* (Mele *tave*). Nevertheless I conclude by echoing Haiman's belief that "the borrowing is not random and indiscriminate". There is still a need for a convincing theory of the 'why' of borrowing, what Weinreich (1953:61) refers to as "one of the unsolved problems of language contact".

NOTES

1. Bislama is the local term for the dialect of Melanesian Pidgin English which is used as a lingua franca in Vanuatu. Other dialects are spoken in the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, the latter being quite well known under the local name Tok Pisin. For descriptions of Bislama see Camden (1977) and Guy (1974).
2. Except for the few hundred people of nearby Fila Island, 'outside the village' implies a different language. It is probable that in pre-European times there was much bilingualism between Mele-Fila and the neighbouring dialects of Efate. Although quite a few middle-aged and older people are still bilingual, this is probably due in large part to the former use of the Erakor language in church and school. It seems likely that the availability of Bislama is tending to eliminate this local bilingualism, except perhaps for those with close kin ties to neighbouring villages.
Also present in Mele are a small number of people born elsewhere who have taken up residence there, mainly as a result of marrying Mele people. Unfortunately I have no data on language use in such households.
3. There is no regular use of vernacular languages on the radio. The only occasions on which I have heard them (aside from local string-band songs) were a short prayer in the Fila dialect as part of a special church service, and a number of emergency messages addressed to particular areas by custom chiefs and politicians during the political crisis of 1980.

4. That is, one tends to assume that the word for 'spoon' or 'bicycle' will be an English borrowing, and hence not to bother asking for such 'obvious' items. Informants, too, may give answers of the form, "Oh, we don't have a word for that - we just say *spoon*..." or whatever. My own strong interest in comparative Polynesian problems also makes me tend to overlook this recently-acquired vocabulary.
5. *Laplap*, a word of uncertain origin, is used in Bislama as well as in local English and French to refer to "a wide range of traditional food dishes, which are prepared by grating or slicing yam, taro, manioc, kumala, banana, breadfruit, etc., wrapping it in leaves, with or without meat, fish, greens, etc., and cooking it in hot stones in an earth oven" (Camden 1977:55).
6. One circumstance which may increase the viability of an extension is where the original referent becomes obsolete or of marginal importance relative to the new referent. Miller (1971) gives the following examples from Shoshoni: *kuicuu buffalo* was extended to include *cow*; *cow* then became the focal meaning of the term, with the result that to specify *buffalo* one must say *piakuiccu big cow*; *?eti bow* was extended to *gun*, which is now the primary meaning, with *bow* being referred to as *huu?eti wooden gun*.

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