

Cultural Imperialism and Linguistic Change: Impact of Cultural Imperialism on Dzongkha Borrowing

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Abstract

In spite of substantial exertion by the government, school and language purists to refine Dzongkha, one still hears locutions such as: “Taxi thopchi-ga?” (Got a taxi?), “Party minjo - ga?” (Are you not going to party?), “Sha kg chi” (a kilogram of meat), and ad infinitum...

The interlocutors barely realize that they are employing lexical items that are borrowed from foreign languages to communicate in Dzongkha.

Language purists are concerned with this threat of linguistic imperialism, but the relentless pursuit of speaking pure Dzongkha seems to be problematic with many speakers. One of the main factors that trigger this trend is change—social and cultural change. As David Crystal (1987) rightly says, “Language would stand still only if society did.”

Languages are always in a state of flux, because societies are, and society entails one’s customs and practices, beliefs, attitude, way of life and the way people organize themselves as a group.

In this paper I intend to dwell on an investigation into:

- Influence of cultural change on Dzongkha language;*
- Why does Dzongkha borrow words?*
- Sources of borrowing;*
- Types of borrowing- Loan words, loan blends, loan translation;*
- Cultural implications of borrowing in Dzongkha, and future prospects.*

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Introduction

In general, people do not pay much attention to the behaviour of others, unless it is dramatically different from the norm. A person can continue doing something marginally odd for a long time, without calling attention to him or herself. However, once people notice the oddity, they tend to over-react. This phenomenon occurs with eating habits, cleanliness, dressing style, or other mannerisms. People either do not notice anything odd, or, if they do, they place the individual concerned into a category of deviant behaviour which probably exaggerates the situation considerably: “The boys dress up like *chhilips*”; “Dorji has started celebrating his birthday now”; “young boys and girls love to party these days”; “Karma’s house looks like an English home”.

The same thing happens with language. People either do not notice the minor deviation from the norm, or they over-react to it, and make comments such as: “Dorji uses lots of English words in his Dzongkha”; “Dema can never complete a Dzongkha sentence without an English word”; “Sonam speaks Dzongkha with an English accent”; “Deki always speaks in English and Nepali” (because she cannot speak in her mother tongue—Dzongkha), when they come across locutions such as: “party *minjo ga?*”; “*choe-gi gari* workshop-*na kegobey*”; “*choe-gi* birthday party *nam-mo?*”.

Society, Culture and Language Change

Any living language changes with time. The phenomenon of language change probably gains more public notice and criticism than any other linguistic issue. Many of the changes are revealed when languages have written records. The best example of language change may be seen when one does a comparative study of Old English and Modern English. The widely held belief about language change is that change must mean deterioration and decay. Language purists do not welcome language change. But it’s evident from literature that there is hardly anything purists could do about change, because in order to stop language one needs to stop social

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and cultural change. Society and culture in turn entails peoples' attitude, taste, practice, custom, belief, peoples' way of life, and the way people organize themselves as a social group. As the speakers and their social environment and practice change, so do the words they use, both in form and meaning.

The following illustrations show how different foreign practices have contributed to change of Dzongkha at differing degrees.

A Waning Practice



Traditional Plough

An Emerging Practice



Power Tiller

In many regions in Paro and Thimphu the traditional practice of plowing land has been increasingly swapped with power tiller, which might trigger the loss of many Dzongkha lexemes such as: *khami*, *ngashi*, *thoop*, *shé*, *ngadu*, *doori*, *péshi*, *pétha*, *khakú*, etc.

An Obsolete Practice



Sang

The Current Practice



Kg

Unlike the ploughing practice, a borrowing of a foreign practice like this has brought about diminutive change in Dzongkha; *sang* is obsolete now, and it is replaced with the foreign word *kg*, thus the locution *maar sang chi* has come to *maar kg chi* (a kilogram of butter).

A Detested Custom



Traditional Dance

A Trendy Custom



Current Trend

Borrowing in the former two illustrations is purely due to technological development, thus triggered by the 'need-filling motive'. But in case of the third illustration it's a sheer

instance of admiration and high regard for foreign culture. This is apparent in every Bhutanese community and society, irrespective of education and social standing, thus driven only by the second type of motive for borrowing, called the 'prestige motive'.

Views on Borrowing and Language Change

People have differing views on language change. Here are two of the contradicting views by two linguists on language change:

Time changes all things: there is no reason why language should escape this universal law.

- Ferdinand de Saussure.

Some method should be thought on for ascertaining and fixing our language forever... I see no absolute necessity why any language should be perpetually changing.

- Ernest Weekley

Singye Namgyel, (2003) found that the attitude of high school students on Dzongkha borrowing from source languages like Nepali, English, and Hindi as a deterioration to the national language. Now, this is paradoxical. Besides many other factors, adoption of foreign culture is one of the causes for language change, and there is a remarkably high tendency with the Bhutanese youth to emulate and acquire foreign culture. In fact, generally speaking, every community in our society: civil servants, students, parents, business men, or elite society, has a fondness for an exotic culture.

Borrowing

Though all aspects of language structure and use (phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics) are subject to change, I shall restrict my analysis on Dzongkha lexical change as a result of borrowing.

According to S. Kemmer (n.d): "Loan words are words adopted by the speakers of one language from a different language." Many linguists use 'loan words' and 'borrowing'

metaphorically, though some others would refer 'borrowing' only to the 'process' of speakers adopting words from a source language into their native language, and 'loan words' to the borrowed items.

Linguistic borrowing is little different from ordinary borrowing, in that there is no literal lending process taking place. There is no transfer from one language to another, and no 'returning' words to the source language. They simply come to be used by a speech community that speaks a different language from the one they originated in.

Conditions for Borrowing

In order for a language to borrow from another language certain conditions must be met. These are the conditions required in many of the instances of borrowing:

Two or more distinct languages come into contact.

As a result there is cultural contact.

Speech community is either bilingual or multilingual.

The speaker of the borrowing language must understand, or he thinks he understands the particular utterance in the source language.

The speaker of the borrowing language must have some motive, overt or covert, for the borrowing.

The first four conditions do not need much discussion, as these seem very apparent from our experience with language. The last condition is more difficult to understand, and deserves more insight. This condition may be further analyzed under 'reasons for borrowing'.

Reasons for Borrowing

In many instances of borrowing, there seem to be two reasons: 'the prestige motive' and 'the need-filling motive'.

The Prestige Motive

People often admire and emulate exotic cultures. Given

an option to choose between attending a traditional ceremonial occasion and a contemporary dance party, many youth of today would prefer to attend the latter to the first. As in this respect, the speech of the exotic culture is also emulated and acquired. I presume 'prestige' as one of the motives behind Dzongkha borrowing many loan words particularly from English. This is even more obvious from the findings of Singye Namgyel, (2003).

In all of the respondents' attitudes English is regarded as a language of education, social status, social position, and prestige. Besides seeing it as the prestigious language, many informants regard English as the language of information technology, international lingua franca, and library language.

The Need-filling Motive

Modern education, technological development, international relation, trade and commerce, etc., could be some of the motives behind Dzongkha borrowing under the need-filling motive. When new experiences, practices, and items enter the language, these bring with them new loan words into the language system. The word *sang* 'weighing instrument' for instance, is becoming obsolete. People no longer say, "*maar sang chi*", 'one (measuring) unit of butter'. The phrase has changed to *maar kg chi* 'one kilogram of butter'. This is a distinct instance of how new experiences and practices replace the old word with a new loan word. We should not be surprised if *khami* 'plough' and *ngashi* 'yoke', as the traditional words related to the practice of ploughing the field with a pair of oxen, is slowly replaced by 'power tiller', because many farmers do not follow the traditional method any more.

Loan words from Hindi, Nepali, and also English, are borrowed to fulfill the need-filling motive. The informants of Singye Namgyel, (2003) seem to suggest that borrowing from Hindi and Nepali is for need-filling motive rather than for the prestige motive; as it is evident from their, "attitudes on other foreign languages":

"Nepali and Hindi... Our country is filled with foreigners,

so in order to deal with them I learn foreign languages.”
(ID-382)

“Hindi, it is important as sometimes we have to deal with
Hindu labourers.” (ID-420)

“It is an important language for us because we have often
interaction with the Indians in terms of trade and even
visiting... people visit India for business.” (ID-701)

The author, too, has reported that among foreign
languages, Hindi was predominantly used as a language of
business. Unlike English, Hindi and Nepali are regarded as
languages of business and communication.

Some Examples of Dzongkha Loan Words

As one walks down the street, travels in a bus, sits in a bar,
listens to two old friends conversing, eavesdrops on a pack of
women gossiping, or enters a shopping complex, one
repeatedly hears exchanges with these locutions:

Thimphu jomi taxi duga? ‘Is there a taxi going to Thimphu?’

Tæm mindu ‘I have no time’.

Pura zada. ‘You can eat all’.

Kho Mi paka yœ ‘He is a good man’.

Baza minju-ga? ‘Are you not going to town / market?’

sathay-gi pagarasi ma-thop ‘I could not find my land-tax
(paper) receipts’.

Ema KG sum basho ‘Bring three kilograms of chilly’.

Gari mathop saa ‘I didn’t get a lift’.

Words such as: *taxi, tæm, pura, paka, baza, pagarasi,*
kg, gari, etc., are not native words. Many interlocutors barely
realize that foreign loan words have been employed into their
language system.

Like many other languages (with English as an exception)
Dzongkha, too, is resistant to borrowing. Language purists
make their utmost attempt to stop borrowing through ‘loan
translation’. The general stance on Dzongkha borrowing is
apparent from these resisting remarks by the two student
informants in S. Namgyel, (2003):

“So we don’t speak fluent Dzongkha, English or Hindi, but it becomes a mixture. Sir, I think this (mixture) should be discouraged especially in the schools.... I think it will be very difficult for them to learn one proper language.”

(ID-704)

“Speaking other languages like Nepali, Hindi, etc., is damaging our National language more.” (ID-360)

Types of Borrowing in Dzongkha

Depending on the degree of complexity of the two languages—the borrowing language (Dzongkha), and the source languages (English, Hindi, and Nepali)—different types of borrowing has taken place. Depending upon what aspect of the word is borrowed, borrowing in Dzongkha may be analysed as: ‘loan words’, ‘loan blends’, and ‘loan translations’.

‘Loan words’ are those foreign words borrowed into Dzongkha with the same ‘form and meaning’. Words such as: *taxi*, *tam*, *gari*, *paka*, and many more are borrowed in this manner. Thus, they are loan words. Many of these words undergo pronunciation change while others are borrowed without any modification.

‘Loan blends’ are little distinct from loan words, in that the former borrows the meaning and only a part of the form from the source language. In Dzongkha, *pagarasi* and *atali* are two examples of loan blends. In both, the meaning is borrowed from English but the forms are adapted to native words.

‘Loan translations’ occur when the morphemes in the borrowed words are translated item by item. In this type the meaning is borrowed from the source language, but the form is native. ‘Loan translation’ is what many language purists resort to when a foreign word is about to enter the language with the new practice or item. Dzongkha purists have been doing loan translation whenever a new item enters the language. Normally loan translation occurs with phrases and compound words.

The Dzongkha, *dem-dom* ‘post-box’, *jang-thong*

'television', *gelyong-sherig-pekhang* 'national institute of education', and *jithin-ang* 'telephone-number' are just a few examples of loan translation by the purists.

Loan translation, if not done in time, may not survive. The reason is that by the time loan translation is done the loan words would have deeply rooted in the language. They would have already completed the process of adaptation and naturalization. *Jang-thong* and *jithin-ang* are examples of such delayed loan translation. In spite of the native words, people still prefer the loan words (*TV* and *telephone number*) to loan translation. Such loan translations may hardly subsist in the future.

Phonological Mutation

When a language borrows words, the phonological aspect of the word undergoes change. In the case of Dzongkha borrowing, I recognize three main factors for mutation of the loan words: phonemic inventory, syllabic structure, and consonant clusters/distributions.

The English 'free' /**fri:**/ has changed to Dzongkha *phi-ri* in *Ñgi Ñgowa chen chi phiri thop* 'if you buy two you get one free'. The first change, the change of the English voiceless labio-dental fricative, /**f**/, to the Dzongkha voiceless aspirated bilabial plosive, /**ph**/ is because of the first factor, phonemic inventory. In the Dzongkha phonemic inventory, there is no /**f**/ phoneme. As a result, it is automatically changed to the nearest Dzongkha phoneme /**ph**/.

The second change; change of the English monosyllabic /**fri:**/ to the Dzongkha disyllabic *phi-ri* is because of the second and the third factor. Dzongkha presumably has short monosyllabic words with CVC (consonant vowel consonant), CV (consonant vowel), and VC (vowel consonant) syllabic patterns with very minimum, and/or no, consonant clusters unlike English, ['strengths' /**streŋθs**/ (CCCVCCC),] which has as many as three consonant clusters. An extra vowel sound is inserted in between the consonant clusters to adapt the syllabic structure of the new word with the Dzongkha syllabic structure.

Other examples include; *i-si-ku-li* from English 'school' /**sku:l**/, (no /**sk**/ consonant clusters in Dzongkha).

Languages having similar phonological patterns are likely to borrow faster than languages with dissimilar phonological patterns. This may be one of the reasons why English could borrow more than 50 percent of its vocabulary from other languages.

Semantic Change of the Loan Words

Borrowing often results in a semantic (meaning) change of the borrowed items. With phonological mutation the loan words also undergo semantic change. Loanwords like; *chuti*, *paka*, and *baza* seem to be having only the specific or literal meaning in Dzongkha, rather than the broad or metaphorical meaning of the source language. In Dzongkha the words simply mean; *holiday*, *good and market / town* respectively. In Hindi one could say; *mai tera chuti kardung ga* 'I will defeat / fix you' (in a game), *mai paka ayung ga* 'I will surely come,' and *bazari aurat* 'a cheap woman.' [By the way, the word *baza* has been borrowed indirectly from Persian via Hindi, which may be called indirect borrowing]. These metaphorical meanings seem to have lost in the process of borrowing. This is one type of semantic change called 'narrowing.' [The meaning is narrowed down to the literal meaning.]

Look at this sentence; *nga chœ-gi atali yin-na?* 'Am I your servant?' The English word 'orderly' seems to have extended or broadened its meaning, and there is a shift in the meaning of the word. In English the word may simply mean, 'an attendant to a superior officer in the arm-force'. In Dzongkha, we often hear one friend, jokingly, remarking to other friend, *nga chœ-gi atali* 'I am not your servant'. This is a distinct case of semantic broadening/extension of the borrowed words. (The meaning is extended to a metaphorical usage.)

Repercussion of Dzongkha Borrowing

I am always sorry when any language is lost, because languages are the pedigree of nations. -Samuel Johnson.

Language Death

By language death I do not mean the gradual alteration of forms and meaning of Dzongkha over time. It has to do with a more dramatic and less normal event, the total disappearance of the language. When a language dies, it is not because a community has forgotten how to speak, but because another language has gradually ousted the old one as the dominant language, for political and social reasons. Typically, a younger generation will learn Dzongkha from their parents as a mother tongue, but will be exposed at a young age to another more exotic and socially useful language at school and workplace.

In this situation, one of two things is liable to happen. The first possibility is that speakers of Dzongkha will continue speaking it, but will gradually import forms and constructions from the socially dominant language, until the old one is not identifiable as a separate language. This is in reality an extreme case of borrowing. Dzongkha might commit suicide. It slowly demolishes itself by bringing more and more forms from the prestige language, until it destroys its own identity. Language death is a social phenomenon, and is driven by social need and prestige. A socially prestigious language gets used in more and more circumstances, so that previously bilingual speakers have little opportunity to practise the old language.

Cultural Impact

Language is the basis of culture. If the language is lost, the culture is also in danger of being lost. And one's culture is the basis of one's identity: personal, social, national, thus there is a danger of one's identity being lost.

The answers to questions like: Who are you?, Where are you from?, What is your religion?, and many more, are often partially answered by what language one speaks. One would only have to speak to provide the interrogator with innumerable clues about one's personal history and social and cultural identity. The linguistic signals we unwittingly transmit about ourselves every moment of our waking day are

highly distinctive and discriminating. More than anything else, language shows we 'belong', providing the most natural badge of social and cultural identity.

Assumptions and Future Prospects

Owing to the fact of the inevitability of human language change, I would assume the following prospects about Dzongkha:

Dzongkha will continue to borrow from foreign languages.

Dzongkha will go beyond lexical borrowing, and resort to syntactical and grammatical borrowing.

Loan words that are deeply rooted into our language and culture will persist.

'Loan translation' is a favourable substitute for loan words for cultural significance.

There will be a cultural misrepresentation and corrosion as a result of borrowing.

Excessive borrowing could result in language death.

Conclusion

Elders may call it a decay, youngsters may take it as a fashion, and purists may show their utmost resistance, but changes in language (must) happen, as change means growth, vigour, and liveliness. Ernest Weekley has very rightly remarked this about language change, "Stability in language is synonymous with rigor mortis." So stability and constancy are signs of death.

Many loan words that have now entered Dzongkha would presumably persist, and thus become naturalized. Words like; *pagarasi*, *pura*, *chuti*, *gari*, *haaptha*, *atali* and many others are already naturalized, and are used very actively by different sections of the society. Words such as- *baza*, *iskuli*, *tam*, etc are in the process of naturalization. These loan words are used side by side with the native corresponding words; *thomhka*, *lobda*, and *duotsoe*, respectively.

Loan translation is one of the ways to resist to borrowing.

It needs to be done as soon as a new practice or item enters the language. If translation is delayed we would have the following results: *gari-numkhor* 'vehicle', *taxi-lhakhor* 'taxi', *delkhor-bas* 'bus', and many others. People do not use the loan translated words any more.

As a cautionary note to the language purists, it's worth mentioning about a bizarre situation in Kupwar, India. Gumperz and Wilson, (1971) found that in Kupwar (roughly 200 miles south-east of Bombay), three distinct language families, Indo-European and Dravidian came into contact. Three languages are in common use: Kannada (Dravidian), Urdu and Marathi (Indo-European). These languages have been in contact for more than six centuries, and many of the inhabitants are traditionally bilingual or multilingual. The Kupwar situation is strange, in that though the three languages were in contact for more than six centuries, borrowing of vocabulary has been rare, which is unusual, because vocabulary items normally spread easily. The language purists seem to have felt the need to maintain their ethnic identity by keeping separate words for things in different languages, due to social pressure. Meanwhile, the syntax (sentence structure) of all three languages has crept closer and closer together, so that now the Urdu, Marathi, and Kannada spoken in Kupwar are fairly different from the standard form of these languages, with Urdu in particular having changed.

When speakers become so resistant about lexical borrowing, language might resort to other types of borrowing such as: grammatical borrowing, semantic borrowing, and morphological borrowing. As one may have already noticed, the instances of intonation borrowing in Dzongkha from English:

Tiru gon - na? (With falling pitch on the question word 'na'),
'Do you need money?'

Tiru go? (With rising pitch on the verb 'go'), 'Do you need money?'

The question word, 'na' in (1) has been disappearing in

many of the youngsters' speech, but the intonation on the verb, *go* in (2) is raised so as to appear similar to that of English:

You need money. (Falling intonation on 'money') – Statement.
You need money? (Rising intonation on 'money') – Question.

The borrowing of intonation has been a current trend with young speakers. Elder speakers seem to be unaffected by this trend—*Tiru gon-na?* instead of *tiru go?*— with rising intonation.

Dr. Stephen A Watters in his paper “Property Concepts in Dzongkha” (10th Himalayan Language Symposium, 1st – 3rd 2004, Thimphu) has presented further interesting facts about Dzongkha borrowing in *Pasap* dialect under Chukha Dzongkhag:

nga kho - lu ngo.she-θ “I know / recognize him.”

I he DAT face.know (he's an acquaintance)

The Dative case ‘*lu*’ agrees with the *object* complying with the Indo-European (Hindi) agreement:

mai us- ko janta hun

I he- DAT know/recognize.

But in accepted (standard) Dzongkha the case agreement is with the subject, and it's a Nominative case as in (3):

n̄ga -gi kho ngo she.

I NOM he know.

In a world where humans grow old, tadpole changes into frog, and milk turns into cheese, it would be strange if language alone remained unaltered.

Jean Atchison, (1986)

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