

FaR 2021

International Forum “Freedom and responsibility in pivotal times”

**NATIONAL LANGUAGES PROTECTION REVISITED.
CULTURE-SPECIFIC VOCABULARY: LOANWORDS VS.
SEEKING EQUIVALENTS**

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Abstract

Dictionaries add an average of 500-600 new words each year, many of them of foreign origin. Loanwords find inroads into the word stock of a language through its natural development and enrichment. While borrowing words directly may be necessary when it comes to culture-specific vocabulary, doing that excessively raises legitimate concerns for purity and uniqueness of a national language. Loanwords tend to be assimilated due to our brain's specific function of perceiving a word as a complete image, irrespective of what it actually means, rather than reading them letter by letter or syllable by syllable. Media and social networks make us memorize loanwords by using them repeatedly. As we mindlessly add up such words to our vocabulary this way, we ease up on our critical attitude to using them, which would pave the way to all sorts of manipulations while also aggravating misunderstanding within the language speaking community. This article holds up the work of the Académie Française as an example of how to deal with the influx of borrowings in a sustainable manner, and analyzes the case of *fake news* to illustrate how French equivalents are elaborated. The authors highlight the portmanteau principle as a current and prolific word-building model, maintaining that merging two words into one is both practical and pragmatic and arguing that it is in line with native language speakers' seeking to save their speech efforts, to be original, expressive and unique.

2357-1330 © 2022 Published by European Publisher.

Keywords: Loanwords, national languages, portmanteau words, fake news, linguistic security

1. Introduction

In 2020, the AKADEMOS Spelling Reference Resource of the V.V. Vinogradov Russian Language Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences updated its Spelling Dictionary to introduce 675 new words with their correct Russian spelling, including such entries as кешбэк (from cashback), подкаст (from podcast), or каршеринг (from carsharing) (Polytech Online Library, 2021).

How to put that 675 into perspective? Some argue that we actually use many more loanwords, their number rising exponentially year by year. In April of 2020, Merriam-Webster (2020) website reported 535 new words added up to the dictionary, from deepfake all the way to zonkey. The number is, as we can see, not so dramatically different from the one provided by the Russian database. Now, will that mean that all American coinages appear in Russian dictionaries as quickly as they do in English ones? And if they do, is it good or bad news?

2. Problem Statement

Advocates of having more loanwords in the national language would insist that borrowed words are necessary and even indispensable when a new word gives a handy name to something that did not have any before. An extended definition in the same language would by contrast be hard to memorize and long to say. Besides, the public always wants to be trendy, regarding anything that comes from abroad as progressive, advanced and therefore attractive. Meanwhile, they do not think that the national language's purity would be compromised in any way whatsoever, since the language, being a flexible system, would discard anything it does not need over time.

There is yet another pro argument here. New words are something that comes natural to a language. According to Merriam-Webster compilers, a language could be described as a mirror of any given period, with new words emerging to reflect and talk about the world around us. As the words get widely used, it is the job of the dictionary to explain the way they are supposed to be used (Merriam-Webster, 2020).

Opponents argue that unnecessary borrowings only contaminate the language and could be easily replaced by own equivalents. Other than some specific domains like science and technology, there is hardly anything that could not be plainly articulated in one's native tongue. Confronted with odd word formation patterns forced upon them, language speakers tend to forget how to make words in their own language, with the media and governmental agencies and officials fostering the spread of foreign words. Sergey Kara-Murza (2000) describes the language of the media as one of a news announcer reading out the text he got from his editor who finalized the journalist's material to meet the requirements of the Board. It is nothing less than one-way flow of words aimed at persuading the target audience. Moreover, loanwords are at times denigrated for seeking to give an utterance an air of prestige. Indeed, by replacing the Russian word общение (communication) for коммуникация to make it sound more, as it were, foreign, one would seemingly back one's most trivial ideas with scientific authority (Kara-Murza, 2000).

3. Research Questions

In this article, we shall challenge ourselves with two questions. One, do loanwords pose any threat, be it actual or potential, to a national language and its speakers? We shall therefore view borrowings from the linguistic security perspective, which is understood here as “a state of a text (utterance) at which its conflictogenity is next to nothing, as are the risks facing its author, character or addressee” (Trofimova, 2012, p. 32). And two, do we have any productive word-building pattern that could be of help when rendering the meaning of the words that appear culture-specific? In answering the two questions, we shall analyze the phrase *fake news* with its French counterparts.

4. Purpose of the Study

The article will therefore have as the objective finding out whether present-day borrowings actually constitute a threat to a national language, and if they do, how to protect it.

5. Research Methods

We shall start by looking at other reasons why, besides the aforementioned, loanwords find inroads into a national language, in our case Russian, so readily. Well, media and social networks do make a contribution, driving new words into everyday usage by way of multiple repetition. But why is that? As we will show hereinafter, many language speakers are set against excessive borrowing.

The likely answer might come from the evidence that people tend to memorize words as they do faces. Back in 2015, a team of researchers at Georgetown University had an article published in the Journal of Neuroscience saying our brain perceives words as a whole image, rather than reading them syllable by syllable or letter by letter. Word recognition is done by a small area of the cortex called the visual word form area located in the left-hand part of the visual cortex that processes visual information. The opposite right-hand part accommodates the area that recognizes human faces.

6. Findings

As part of an experiment, the subjects were asked to look at and try to memorize a number of pseudowords. Learning completed, their visual word form area manifested a different kind of activity, since they recognized the strains of letters they were shown as if they saw words they knew well (Georgetown University Medical Center, 2015).

It can be assumed that this brain function is what facilitates infiltration of foreign words into the national word stock in absence of any counter measures. It takes our brain a mere visual recognition to regard such words as familiar, the meaning being irrelevant to such recognition. As for the media and social networks, their role is just the same as the experimenters played – to show the words many times, for the public to remember and eventually recognize them.

We believe that there might be a hidden catch here for speakers of a national language because it is just the outer shell of the word that is borrowed this way, no nuances of meaning, usage, combinability, connotations or stylistic value. Mastering it all together is a tasking exercise for the memory, while

familiarizing the image is easy. The trick is that you cannot use the word adequately and responsibly without knowing all of the above. So, we are left ignorant of the fitting contexts or indeed of how to respond when we come across that word.

It would probably not be too much to assume that borrowing a word together with the material object it denotes is one thing, for what we are talking about is a new thing that has no name attached to it so far. So, people see the thing and relate the new word to the one concrete object, and that is how know what the word actually denotes. But when we are talking about an abstract notion, an *idea-word*, it works only for those who speak the source language, e.g. English. Therefore, it is only this relatively small group that uses the word, aware of its whole bunch of meanings and usages, since they treat it the same way as the source language speakers do. As they use the word speaking their native language, they do it for practical reasons, there being just one word to effectively render a wealth of notions and images, instead of explaining things at length in their mother tongue. Meanwhile, for those who have zero command of the source language it is nothing but a strange sound. In the best-case scenario, they would assimilate it in just one meaning, which would probably already have a word in their native tongue. But that begs the question, why borrow a word when we have one like that?

There is yet another counterargument. By introducing strange foreign words excessively, we promote rifting the society into those who know and those who do not.

This statement resonates with a recent survey by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center VCIOM, with 67% standing by Russian words and coined Russian terms, compared to just 23% backing loanwords circulating widely across the globe. Notably, the former group mostly comprised people over 25 years old, while the latter mainly included those between 18 and 24. A similar dichotomy is observed not just across age groups, but also between big cities vs. smaller communities, the former being more pro-borrowing than the latter (Russian Public Opinion Research Center, 2021). It can be assumed that the divide is, among other reasons, due to complete or partial misunderstanding of newly borrowed words.

One way of protecting the national language could consist in a “roadblock” filtering out direct borrowings; the work of the Académie Française is a good example. The Academy is in charge of regulating the language and literary norms of the French language, searching for or coining French equivalents to English loanwords. Efforts to protect French date back to 1500’s, with Francis I signing into law the *Ordonnance de Villers-Cotterêts* in 1539 that enshrined in law the use of French as the only state language and provided for all local authorities to use it instead of Latin. Later, the Toubon Law was adopted in 1994 to perpetuate the status of French as the major official language to be used in governmental papers, at work, on signboards and labels, in contracts, business communications and some other areas. The ordinance was prompted by a wide use of English in all spheres of the French society.

Members of the Academy should be given credit for their invention. Where speakers of other languages give in before English loanwords, unable to solve the riddle, the French do find equivalents or make new words in their native language. To illustrate the point, we shall now consider the *fake news* case. The hard task of looking for a French counterpart appeared even more troublesome, there still being no consensus as to what it actually is and no satisfying definition. The only thing that can be argued here is that its meaning is something different from both *false news* and *disinformation*.

As the term *fake news* first emerged during Donald Trump's presidential campaign, the French Academy faced the challenge of translating it. A team of experts at the Ministry of Culture was fast to say that its verbatim translation as *fausse nouvelle* or *fausse information* would not be acceptable for two reasons. First, both terms are already part of the Freedom of Press Act of 1881, and second, both fail to reflect the context and the whole range of meanings of the new word.

Indeed, if we compare Article 27 of the above Act (Loi du 29 juillet 1881 sur la liberté de la presse, A-27, 2002) with the Urban Dictionary definition, we will see that *fake news* is far ahead of both its predecessors in terms of the scope of meaning.

Urban Dictionary makes a reservation that, apart from the basic categorial meanings of "lie" and "untruth", *fake news* also evokes other shades of meaning depending on the speaker's aim in each particular situation. Talking about the aim implies the use of *fake news* to manipulate addressees as part of a plan (Barclay, 2018). The plan might consist in gaining wealth, compliance on the part of voters, forming a required sentiment with regard to an event, a fact, etc. Based on the most common plans, Urban Dictionary singles out the following six types of fakes: outright lie, lying by omission, lying by structure, selective outrage, emotive appeal, hidden retraction (Fake news, 2021).

Some scholars have seven types: false news, polarized content, satire, misreporting, commentary, persuasive information, and citizen journalism (Molina et al., 2021); satire or parody, misleading content, imposter content, fabricated content, false connection, false context, manipulated content (Paśławska & Popielska-Borys, 2018).

Evidently, the whole bunch of meanings of the term *fake news* could not be possibly incorporated in the "good old lies" (Barclay, 2018).

Pierrette Crouzet-Daurat, Head of the French Language Development and Enrichment Commission, argues for infox as the French equivalent of choice to fake news (Robin, 2018). *She explained to France Culture that this is a portmanteau word coined by way of haplology, where two word stems merge, eliminating a shared syllable. That was the case when two syncopated stems of the words information and intoxication merged to eliminate their shared syllable o: info+(int)ox. Ms. Crouzet-Daurat insists that the word was coined specifically to retain the meaning "harm", since any fake implies gaining profit to self through harming others. That is how the coinage got its second component from intoxication. She finds the solution a success, for the new word eventually got readily assimilated by speakers of French, it is short, up-to-date, concise, catchy and semantically transparent* (Robin, 2018).

The academicians' choice in favour of the portmanteau solution is due to a number of reasons. First, more meanings can be rendered via the use of two word stems. Second, merging two words into one is pragmatic, because it satisfies the speakers' need for less speech efforts, more originality, expressiveness and uniqueness. Portmanteau words can also be regarded as a means of speech compression, making linguistic units more informative and eliminating the components that can be easily derived from the non-verbal part of the text (Sobchenko, 2013). Moreover, such words are generally considered fitting provided that they meet the next requirements: completion probability/understandability, association, applicability, naturalness/euphony, fun factor, uniqueness (Bodley, 2016).

The Russian language could well assimilate this pattern, the more so as its speakers feel the need to replace some foreign words for ones that make more sense to them. Pushkin State Russian Language

Institute has recently conducted a survey where students collected the most annoying loanwords. The survey resulted in a list of 275 entries like *бэкграунд* (*background*), *воркаут* (*workout*), *воркшоп* (*workshop*), *девайс* (*device*), *дедлайн* (*deadline*), *инфлюэнсер* (*influencer*), *каршеринг* (*carsharing*), *квиз* (*quiz*), *коворкинг* (*coworking*), *коливинг* (*coliving*), *коммитмент* (*commitment*), *локдаун* (*lockdown*), *маркетплейс* (*marketplace*), *нетворкинг* (*networking*), *плейлист* (*playlist*), *продакт плейсмент* (*product placement*), *стартап* (*startup*), *тимбилдинг* (*team building*), *фрилансер* (*freelancer*), *эндаумент* (*endowment*) and other. Margarita Rusetskaya, Rector of the Institute, said to the *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*: “We are all for car rental options, but we are against *каршеринг*. French, Spanish, German and even Hebrew speakers did find the words in their native languages. So why should Russian, strong, rich and versatile as it is, be looking for shortcuts?” (Kuhntenkova, 2021, p. 24).

In fact, Russian does resort to the portmanteau principle to coin new words. Think of the Delimobil’ carsharing service launched in 2015, which might have replaced каршеринг, had it emerged earlier. Indeed, the time factor plays a major role in how readily the proposed national equivalent would be assimilated. If it comes too early, it runs the risk of misunderstanding, while the new object has not yet been around enough to be widely known. If too late, the borrowed word would have already been assimilated by the time. That was the case of lobby, parking and week-end in French. Infox was also a bit late to turn up, but it appeared so much up to the point that currently infox and fake news enjoy peaceful coexistence. The answers to the questions raised at the beginning of this article can therefore be affirmative. Yes, excessive infiltration of loanwords is indeed potentially harmful, not so much for the language itself as for its speakers due to a lower critical perception threshold, higher risks of public opinion getting manipulated, and bigger misunderstanding within society. As for the second question, the portmanteau pattern appears to be rather productive in coining new words to replace foreign ones that had no ready equivalents before. The two-stem model incorporates the full array of meanings of both components in the word, while the word itself is short (so much unlike descriptive translations) and expressive, a true result of what word creation is supposed to be. French exemplifies how this pattern actually works with its very appropriate term infox instead of fake news.

7. Conclusion

We could make good use of our brain’s ability to memorize words as images to enrich our national language with more Russian words. Does it indeed make any difference, which word to memorize as an image, a foreign one or one that has been coined from Russian stems? There being no difference, national language institutes could be more engaged in creating and offering more national equivalents to loanwords. And then, the 675 borrowed words added to the Russian Spelling Dictionary in 2020 could have turned into 675 new Russian words proper. Foreign languages could be treated not as direct sources of borrowings, but rather as ones of inspiration, evoking invention and creative potentials of speakers of national languages.

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