

The French Language: Variation and Change

Lexical borrowing

What do you think?

1. Which languages might assimilate better into French, and why?
2. These words were borrowed into English from Anglo-Norman, the variety of French which was spoken in England under Norman rule: *prey, veil, strait; garden, catch; wage, war*. Find out what the modern French cognates of these words are (a cognate is a word which is similar in two languages, eg. *colour* and *couleur*). Then by comparing the English word and the modern French word, see if you can work out which sound changes took place in mainland France which didn't happen in Anglo-Norman.
3. Do you think changes in a language are always externally motivated, as with borrowing?
4. Here is an extract of an interview with the linguist Claude Hagège in *Le Point* (19/1/2012). To what extent do you agree with his point of view? Is borrowing good, bad, or just inevitable?

Interviewer : N'est-ce pas l'essence même d'une langue d'évoluer ?

Claude Hagège : Vous avez raison. Le français est à 90 % latin. Évidemment, les langues vivent d'emprunts. Mais c'est un phénomène à évaluer en fonction d'un seuil. En deçà de 7 à 10 %, l'emprunt est vivant, alimente et enrichit. De 10 à 15 %, on est sur le chemin de l'indigestion. Au-delà de 25 %, on doit craindre une menace. À partir de 70 %, on parlera davantage de substitution.

Useful websites

www.oqlf.gouv.qc.ca (Office Québécois de la Langue Française)

www.bdl.oqlf.gouv.qc.ca (Banque de Dépannage Linguistique)

Further reading

*W. Ayres-Bennett, J. Carruthers, & R. Temple, *Problems and Perspectives: Studies in the Modern French Language* (Routledge, 2001)

*A. Battye, P. Rowlett, & M. Hintze, *The French language today: a linguistic introduction* (Routledge, 2000)

F. Gadet & R. Ludwig, *Le français au contact d'autres langues* (Ophrys, 2015)

H. Mitterand, *Les mots français* (Presses Universitaires de France, 2000)

H. Walter, L'integration des mots venus d'ailleurs. (2005) Available at <https://journals.openedition.org/alsic/324?file=1>

H. Walter, *L'aventure des mots français venus d'ailleurs*. (Paris: R Laffont 2014)

*H. Wise, *The Vocabulary of Modern French* (Routledge, 1997)

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Suggested answers to 'What do you think?'

1. Languages with similar sound systems and patterns, such as plural formation, might fit in better, but there's not really a hard and fast rule. Irregular plurals in English can take the donor language plural or the French plural: *des businessmen* or *des businessmans*. Also, the extent to which an English borrowing is integrated is partly to do with the individual speaker's familiarity with English: a speaker who doesn't know English might pronounce *le sweat* like 'sweet' (perhaps by analogy with *le beach volley*) whereas a speaker who is familiar with English is more likely to use its original pronunciation.

2. These words show us that in mainland France a diphthong sounding like 'wa' evolved (*proie, voile, étroit*), 'ga' and 'ca' evolved to sound like 'ja' and 'sha' (*jardin, chasser* – this process is called palatalization), and the initial 'w' of Germanic words like *war* changed to 'gw' and then 'g' (*gage, guerre*). These changes occurred gradually during the Middle Ages.

3. Internal change happens without influence from other languages. It may include things like reduction of consonant clusters or reduction or levelling of verb paradigms to make them easier, analogy (where speakers unconsciously model one construction onto another), or imperfect learning, resulting in gradual change over time.

4. This is up to you!