

THE TYPOLOGY OF LEXICAL BORROWING

(Full Presentation)

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This paper presents some of the initial results of a large-scale international research project on lexical borrowing. The collaborative project involved several dozen scholars, each an expert on a particular language, who worked on a language sample representing the geographical, typological, genealogical, and sociolinguistic diversity of the world's languages. Each contributor was asked to compile an extensive computerized lexical database based on a fixed list of 1,460 meanings. These lists included all items on the Swadesh list and on the Intercontinental Dictionary Series list, along with some additional items. The individual databases were then integrated into one consolidated database which allowed us to tabulate and summarize the results and to generate statistics.

Unlike word lists traditionally used for lexical comparison and analysis, our database structure allows an unlimited number of words to be linked to a single meaning and conversely an unlimited number of meanings to be linked to one word. Moreover, in addition to the word form itself, a wealth of other information was provided for each lexical item, such as morphological structure, age, and loanword status (ranging from 'no evidence for borrowing' to 'clearly borrowed'). For loanwords, additional information was supplied, such as the donor language, the source word, and the sociohistorical circumstances of the borrowing.

Among other things, the results of the project allow us to indicate what kinds of meanings are more borrowable than others. In some cases our findings correspond to previous statements about lexical borrowing, and the novelty lies in providing a solid empirical basis for these hypotheses. Thus we show that lexical meanings are far more borrowable than grammatical meanings, and that nominal meanings are more borrowable than verbal ones. However, the results also allow us to go far beyond such generalizations, and to make predictions about narrower lexical categories and even about individual meanings. For example, the 20 least borrowed meanings in our database include important natural phenomena ('water', 'fire', 'root') and body parts ('nose', 'breast', 'tongue', 'bone', 'mouth'), as well as one animal ('fly'). There are also a few basic verbal meanings ('to go', 'to come', 'to stand', 'to bite') and two adjectival meanings ('bitter', 'far'). Grammatical meanings include three deictics ('you [singular]', 'this', 'yesterday') and two interrogatives ('who?', 'what?'). It is interesting to note that none of these meanings are directly related to human culture. This confirms the assumption made in previous studies that culture-free meanings are less borrowable than cultural ones. Also included in this paper are a cross-linguistic comparison of lexical borrowing rates and an analysis of various motives for lexical borrowing.

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