WORD BORROWING AND WORD PLAY AMONG NGAWBERE (Panama)

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ABSTRACT

The present paper is concerned with the phenomenon of word borrowing among Ngawbere (speakers of ngawbere). More specifically, the paper emphasizes the phoneticization as well as the semanticization of loan words into ngawbere from Spanish and English. Whereas the process of phoneticization is constrained by phonological transformations (nasalization, voicing, de-voicing), the process of semanticization that occurs in word borrowing is abetted by sociocultural processes. Three examples of word borrowing and two examples of word play are presented.

INTRODUCTION

This essay considers the sociocultural aspects of the process of word borrowing from one language to another. The emphasis herein is on the way an indigenous population of western Panama adopts foreign words into their language by phoneticizing them in a manner which semanticizes them, whether or not the introduced meaning is faithful to the original usage in the foreign language. The ideas that are presented are a response to the claim by some that the incorporation of foreign words into an indigenous language results in an alteration in sounds, but little more. The language (ngawbere) spoken by the indigenous population that self-identifies as Ngawbere is ideal for examining word borrowing and word play since ngawbere is an "isolating" language that builds on morphemes with distinctive meanings as the basis for word construction (see Sherzer 1982, 1985).

BACKGROUND

The population among whom linguistic and ethnographic data was collected live in western Panama. They self-identify as Ngawbere and speak an indigenous language of the same name (ngawbere). Ngawbere represent the western and most populous portion of the population designated as Guaymí both in Spanish chronicles and the ethnographic literature, and a much smaller population as Buglere[1] that live to the east. Today there are many more Ngawbere than Buglere. Ngawbere are the most numerous of the five indigenous populations in the Republic of Panama.

At the time of the Spanish conquest, there were several different indigenous populations on the isthmus of Panama. The consensus among archaeologists is that these populations inhabited the valleys of the major rivers which formed a kind of ecological boundary between the various populations (De La Guardia 1982; Cooke 1981; Helms 1979). More than likely, Ngawbere were a small group living near the middle range of Cricamola River[2] in a small area inland from the coast of what today is central Bocas del Toro Province.

The history of Spanish settlement on the isthmus is one of westward expansion along the Pacific coast following the initial efforts to establish settlements near what today is the San Blas Islands.[3] Settlements on the Atlantic side of western Panama seldom lasted more than a few years; all were doomed to failure. By the 17th century, the Spanish in Panama had established a few settlements and missions that were provisioned by cattle haciendas, but all of these were located along the southern or Pacific side of the continental divide (Carles 1959; Perez 1962[1862]; De Peralta 1883). While the Pacific settlements continued to develop and prosper, the Atlantic coast of western Panama remained unsettled and relatively unexplored. Whereas nearly all of the other indigenous populations were decimated through warfare, diseases and mesticización, the Ngawbere population grew in size and expanded south over the continental divide. The largest concentration of Ngawbere remained on the northern slopes below the continental divide and received very little contact from the Spanish in western Panama (France 1792).

The Atlantic coast was not without foreign contact, however, which occurred in the form of Miskito incursions and the raids of English and French privateers (Roberts 1927; Cooke 1981). For a brief time, French missionaries (Jesuits) had contacts with Ngawbere along Cricamola River.[4] It was not until the 19th century that the first permanent settlement occurred along the Atlantic coast of western Panama. This occurred on Isla Colón and nearby islands, where English fishermen with slaves settled in what today is the provincial capital (Aizpurus 1960; Roberts 1827). By the 20th century, other nationalities had moved into Bocas del Toro Province where they settled along the western and central coast. Today the eastern half of the province remains primarily indigenous.

In sum, from the time of the Spanish Conquest to the 20th century, Ngawbere had sporadic contact with the Spanish (especially on the Pacific side of the continental divide), and French and English (primarily on the Atlantic side). The historic situation, therefore, provided a fertile ground for minor changes in the ngawbere language. Except in areas

bordering Spanish settlements, no major language shifts of the magnitude described by Dorian (1982) or Pfaff (1979) have occurred.

The emphasis in the material that follows is on the occasional borrowing of English and Spanish into ngawbere. Implicit in the argument is the notion that word borrowing shows evidence of an attitude of self-determination that permeates Ngawbere identity and culture. The three examples represent the areas of domestic life and health care.

THE DATA

For present purposes, word borrowing is postulated to occur at two interelated levels:

Level one: The phoneticization of foreign words into ngawbere is to be expected, particularly words which refer to objects (or concepts) being introduced into Ngawbere society. Since most words in ngawbere end in one of twelve vowel sounds, borrowed words can expect to end in a final vowel, and moreover, show evidence of nasalization, voicing or de-voicing in order to conform to ngawbere phonology. The principal phonological transformations which occur in ngawbere are:

nasalization:	|b|	--->	|m|
voicing	|p|	--->	|b|
	|k|	--->	|g|
de-voicing	|g|	--->	|k|

Most words in ngawbere end in one of the twelve vowel sounds: |a|, |e| and |û| (short vowels), |i|, |o| and |u| (long vowels), along with the nasalization of each of these six (for a total of twelve) (Kopesec and Kopesec 1974; Arosemena and Javilla 1979). The unnasalized vowels appear most frequently as final sounds in ngawbere.

Level Two: The phoneticized words can expect to have meaning within the ngawbere language (semanticization) that extends beyond or embellishes the original meaning in the foreign language. This particularly is true when the introduced objects (or concepts) are associated with similar objects (or concepts) or strategic importance (Bybee 1985) to Ngawbere culture, that

is, the borrowed word will carry a high semantic load in terms of the more salient values of Ngawbere culture.[5]

Many of the words that have been borrowed from Spanish and English occur in the domain of domestic life.[6] Two words from this domain are given as examples. The third example is drawn from the area of health care.

Domestic Life. The ngawbere term, bleto is derived from the English word 'plate,' and the term besini is derived from 'basin.' Bleto refers to any plate of foreign manufacture; the most common ones acquired by Ngawbere are metal plates. Besini refers to any kind of bowl which is used to serve soupy foods; the most common ones acquired by Ngawbere are made of metal or plastic and come in varying sizes.

For bieto, the initial sound in the stem |plet| is voiced, becoming |blet|. A final |o| sound is added to the stem, forming the suffix |to|, even though four of the other five vowel sounds commonly occur with the |t|, as in the words nurata ['has returned'], nete ['here'], titi ['infant' as a term of endearment; also a species of fish], brutu ['chest'] and tü ['thought'].

For besini, the second vowel is made long, becoming |besin|. A final |i| sound is added, even though any of the unnasalized vowels could have become the final sound, since all occur with the , as in the words kûbûna ['in-law'], henene ['non-kin'], no [location referrent], nu ['armadillo'] and nû ['leech'].

At this point, the question arises whether these two examples reflect only a process of phonetic compatibility or whether there is more involved. The argument here is that there is more involved.

Eating implements in historic times were minimal and included primarily the bowls fashioned from the gourd fruits of the calabazo tree,[7] the leaves of the bijao plant[8] and one's hands. The gourd bowls served to hold soupy mixtures, and were especially useful for holding the fruit purée known as michila. The leaves were used to wrap, cook and serve solid food such as manioc and yams.

The indigenous term for bowl was sio, which contains the morphemes si (meaning 'support') and o (meaning 'caution'). The term sio alludes to the bowl's use to contain (or 'support') liquid mixtures and its inability to stand by itself owing to the curvature of its base. Ngawbere use several terms for the bijao leaves, depending on the

plant species from which the leaves are obtained, the stem for each is kriko, as in the word for the most preferred leaf hawko krikoi.

From historic times to the present, Ngawbere have held a reputation for consuming the purée mixture michila more than any other food item except possibly the cacao drink (Von Ufeldre 1965[1682]; Roberts 1827). Asking another ?mo michila nain carries the surface meaning 'Do you consume purée?' as well as referring implicitly to the question of ethnic identity: 'Are you Ngawbere?'

The term besini acknowledges the adaptation of a foreign material (a metal bowl) as an eating implement, while stressing a continuity in that which is central to Ngawbere culture. The morpheme be refers generically to any gourd, si means 'support',[9] and the suffix ni serves to indicate a "continuity in discourse." In Ngawbere narratives, the first spoken word carries the suffix ni and any other words or concepts which are central to the discourse likewise carry the same suffix (Arosemena 1980). The term besini alludes that the substitution of metal bowls at some time in the historic past was viewed by Ngawbere as not changing what they considered essential to their way of life. The fruit purée and other foods could still be served and consumed during the practice of visiting, during festive labor projects and ritual occasions in which special foods are distributed. The suffix ni in the word for 'bowl' is not used as a continuity marker in a spoken narrative.[10] Instead, it has become permanently affixed to a borrowed word as an indication that the introduction of metal bowls has not lessened the practice of consuming michila, which conveys to Ngawbere their membership in the same ethnic population.

The term for 'plate', however, does not carry the same semantic load that occurs with the term besini. The root form ble refers to errors in the repair of clothing, wherein the manufacture of the repairing stitches is enlarged and becomes cumbersome to the wearer,[11] and the suffix to refers to any kind of 'imprint' (such as a footprint).

Plates are used to serve food items which provide the bulk of Ngawbere diet (such as yams and manioc); the root tubers serve as dietary staples, but they do not form a part of the ritual system, as do the purée michila and the cacao drink. Hence, the argument for what is alluded to in the word bieto is more tenuous. Since plates are not (and cannot) be disposed in the same manner as the traditional cooking leaves, they become "cumbersome" to Ngawbere by virtue of their quality of permanency. They require washing after each meal (which the leaves do not), and families must pack them up for transporting or storing when they rebuild their houses or move to a new area.

Thus, although the two terms besini and bieto each have introduced meanings in the ngawbere language, the meaning of the former carries a greater semantic load in terms of Ngawbere values.

Health Care. The collection of lexical data in the area of health care was more extensive than any other area, yet there were fewer examples of English or Spanish terms that had been incorporated into ngawbere. This does not preclude the possibility that the development of a system of indigenous medicine incorporated loan words for ritual concepts or medicinal plants from other indigenous languages at an earlier date.

Since 1973, the government has been establishing health posts along the Atlantic coast, and with them have come modern medicines and a program of vaccination. No special word is used to identify the foreign medicines, although Ngawbere differentiate folk medicine [kroko konsen], which relies heavily on ritual and botanical remedies, from cosmopolitan medicine [chiwi krokoi] by affixing an adjective to the term kroko ('medicine').

Regarding vaccinations and innoculations, the Spanish term aguja [for 'needle'] has been phoneticized in ngawbere and shortened to become agu. Each phoneme of aguja has a counterpart in ngawbere: a occurs in several contexts (sometimes referring to time), gu occurs less frequently, and ha is a reflexive referrent. Both a and gu can occur as affixes at the beginning, middle or end of words, but ha only occurs as a pre-positional affix. When occurring as a post-positional affix, ha becomes hai, in which case it emphasizes the action performed by or done to someone [as in the phrase mru den hai, meaning 'seeking food for oneself']. Although phonetically it would be permissible to transform the term aguja to |aguhai| or |gujai|, it would not be plausible semantically in ngawbere.

The free translation of the morphemes a plus gu is 'from the time referred to' and 'hole,' respectively. Conjoined together, the term agu implicates one moment in a temporal sequence of events which occurs when one receives an injection. Since Ngawbere recognize that an injection or vaccination cannot be performed by oneself, it makes sense to drop the reflexive ha, which leaves only the compound agu to refer to innoculations. Hence, the transformation to agu is compatible with linguistic processes that can occur in ngawbere, and the converted meaning of the original term conveys some sense of how Ngawbere view one of the primary modes of treatment utilized by cosmopolitan medicine.

DISCUSSION

The question can be asked whether in fact Ngawbere have some sense of these secondary meanings in mind when they use the three terms given as examples. Although a detailed response cannot be made by going into the historic past when these terms were incorporated into the language, an answer can be suggested by the way of an ethnographic analogy. The two examples that follow will show that some Ngawbere have an inkling of secondary meanings; these are the people who engage most creatively in word play.

The use of speech for communication among Ngawbere occurs primarily during the practice of visiting between households (basare), discussion during group work projects and mealtime conversations between family members. At such times, Ngawbere sometimes engage in "word play" on the events of the recent past. "Word play" here refers to the practice of accentuating certain syllables or altering sounds to give a new twist in meaning to either foreign or ngawbere words.

One such occasion during fieldwork occurred on Mother's Day, an introduced holiday among Ngawbere which is known as el día de la madre in Spanish and celebrated near the close of the school year on December 8th throughout Panama.[12] On this particular occasion, several Ngawbere families were preparing special meals to honor mothers and grandmothers. At one gathering where the food was being cooked by the women's husbands and sons, the men were discussing the foreign "holiday" and the place of women in Ngawbere society. The gist of their conversation was how women were necessary although troublesome at times. One of the men repeated the Spanish word for 'mother' a couple of times |ma dré, ma dré| in order to summarize in an emphatic fashion what the basic theme was. It seems that the phonemes |ma| and |dre| each have meaning in ngawbere and can be rendered as 'nuisance' and 'obligation,' respectively. The conjoined sounds |ma dré| have two implicit meanings. First, they refer indirectly to the bothersome qualities one perceives in one's mother (or grandmother) while stressing the obligatory nature of the relationship between mother and offspring, and, second, they refer to the nuisance and responsibility thrust upon a (Ngawbere) woman when she becomes a mother.[13]

The second example occurred as word play on a personal name. Names are bestowed at a transitional phase in a person's social life (such as birth and marriage) and are drawn from both sentient and non-sentient phenomena from the world in which Ngawbere live. By making use of the

language's isolating morphemes, names can be used in word play to improvise new meanings. One example of word play on a personal name is given here.

During a festive occasion held to honor the visit of a Panamanian general [Manuel Antonio Noriega] to the Indigenous Reserve, people from several communities gathered to prepare the food to feed the visiting indigenous population coming from nearby areas. Ngawbere clearly recognized that the general's visit was to be brief and unlikely to repeat itself in the near future. Several people used this theme of a quick arrival and short stay to discuss a concurrent case of illness in the community. A neighbor and his wife who initially began staying with an ill man shortly thereafter had stopped their visits, even though people felt the illness episode was not over. Someone created a play on words and altered the man's name from |Mecha| [meaning 'mother-in-law's surface'] to |Machako|. In so doing, the coined name Machako [meaning 'nuisance-one who flees'] could equally refer to the general's visit as well as the neighbor who stopped visiting the ill man. To compound the word play, someone nodded toward the fieldworker and asked: "This one?" [<u>?ni</u> <u>ne</u>], to which the originator of the coined name now <u>stated</u> the intended reference to the man named Mecha. By this time, the additional reference to the fieldworker became clear, as several people smiled or chuckled openly, since the nature of fieldwork, as Ngawbere view it, entails nothing more than a quick arrival and short stay, relatively speaking, against the permanency of spending one's entire life within the Indigenous Reserve. What began as word play with a double meaning was extended to include a third referent.

SUMMARY

Many more examples[14] could be given of the interest that Ngawbere take in word play using both foreign and indigenous terms. Altering sounds to create new meanings in word play appears similar to the process of word borrowing, wherein the phonology of an introduced word may be altered slightly such the term is given a meaning that fits the cultural values that Ngawbere hold as most salient. While the process of phoneticization is operative in word borrowing, to be sure, the sociocultural context of word borrowing appears to operate more decisively in bringing foreign words into the <u>ngawbere</u> langauge. Things or concepts which represent primary concerns to Ngawbere are those which most likely assure the process of word borrowing. The study of word borrowing among Ngawbere should emphasize not only linguistic processes but also sociocultural ones.

POSTSCRIPT

Ngawbere have survived more than four centuries of European Conquest and, in a self-deterministic fashion, they have incorporated but a small portion of what is foreign and made it meaningful to their way of life. The much bigger question we should be asking ourselves is whether their participation in self-determination will continue over the next four centuries of human existence.

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NOTES

1. The term Guaymi apparently derives from the Buglere word ngwamigda which refers to indigena or Amerindian (Robert Gunn, personal communication, October 1984).

2. Suggested by Ngawbwere (ethno)historical narratives; also postulated by Richard Cooke (personal communication, April 1985).

3. Santa María la Antigua was the first settlement attempted by the Spanish on the isthmus of Panama. No settlement of any kind exists today on this site, which is jungle, or the surrounding area.

4. The evidence includes reports of the French priests who worked in Cricamola River (cited by Atencio 1891[1787]:311-316; Palazuelas 1891[1757]:350-352; Fernandez 1886: Vol 5, pp. 165-215, 235-245, 250-261; Ximinez Donosso 1957[1784]:251-258) and a French settlement listed as Taurreau on European maps from the 1700s. The term tura is given by Alphonse (1972) who claims the "old ones" in the Valiente Peninsula told him that these were the people who used to inhabit the area. Today peninsular Ngawbere use the term tura to identify several kinds of airplant, some of which are used as botanical medicine.

5. These were some of the findings of Melquiades Arosemena (personal communication, June 1984) who spent two years conducting linguistic research among Ngawbere on both sides of the continental divide, along with serving as director of SIL during its last years in Panama. (See also Kopesec and Kopesec 1974; Kopesec 1975)

6. According to a lexical list presented in Alphonse (1980:127-128), some 22 of the 43 Spanish-derived and some 19 of the 39 English-derived words are used in relation to domestic life, respectively. Several others not given by Alphonse were collected during fieldwork; most of these, too, are used in domestic life.

7. The calabazo tree is: Crescentia cujete.

8. The bijao leaves are: Calathea sp.

9. Mesi is the name of a mythic figure for Ngawbere who live along the coast. "She" is associated with three others, all of whom "saw" the powerful force Sibrai leaving the Valientee Peninsula (that is, what is shown as Punta Valiente on local maps) according to the narrative account.

10. One other term (namely bani) listed by Alphonse (1956:31-35, 63-118, 1980:127-128) carries the suffix ni. During fieldwork this term was not found to be in use and the related term (for "roof") was given as baninkwata. No other terms collected during fieldwork carry the suffix ni. The use of ni was observed to occur in relation to narrative discourse not only as described by Arosemena (1980) for formal discourse on a past event, but also informal narratives describing an event (such as a fiesta) as it unfolded.

11. The term ble may have been altered upon incorporation from another indigenous language. Lehmann (1920: Vol. I, pp. 166, 170) gives ble as the word for 'sea' in both murire and sabanero, and as 'salt' in sabanero (murire and sabanero are now extinct indigenous languages of groups once bordering Ngawbere). On the adaptation of indigenous words into Spanish, Zamora (1982).

12. Mother's Day is not an indigenous event and has a history within the Indigenous Reserve more recent than the introduction of government schools in rural Panama in the 1950s.

13. In other contexts, ma stands alone as the word for 'sandfly' and serves as the root form of the cry of exasperation |mai|! There is the additional possibility that the man was emphasizing the notion of "nuisance," since neither the morpheme me [referring to mother-in-law, when used as a single syllable word], nor its derivative meye [meaning 'mother'], was included in his word play.

14. One of the more humorous examples (to Ngawbere) collected during fieldwork was the incident in which the name Iachi ['corn penis'] was changed to Ikuaw ['corn

balls'] for purposes of a festive labor junta. It should be made clear that the emphasis herein is on "word play" (which alters both form and content) and not on "play language" (which alters form but not content); compare Sherzer (1970) and Laycock (1972).

APPENDIX: ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES

ngawbere	Derivative
bresisi = 'angle beam' [used to brace endposts in fences, houses] bre- si- si PUSH OUT SUPPORT SUPPORT	brace (Engl)
bobre = 'poor' [in an economic sense and in sense of 'a sad sack] bo- bre IMAGE PUSH OUT	pobre (Span)
brete = 'bun' [generically any bread through an allusion to the rising of the dough] bre- te PUSH OUT INSIDE referent	bread (Engl)
hato = 'pasture' or 'clearing' [allusion to extending the immediate clearing around house] ha- to REFLEXIVE IMPRINT referent	hato (Span archaic)
kruso = 'cross' [primarily religious usage] kru- so TERMINATE BAD HABIT	cruz (Span)

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