

**Henri Estienne and the problem of French-Italian
code-switching in sixteenth-century France**

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It seems appropriate that Henri Estienne (1531-98), the great sixteenth-century humanist and hellenist, compiler of the monumental *Thesaurus linguae graecae* of 1572 and scholarly editor of numerous first editions of ancient Greek authors, should find a place in a volume devoted to the French language and questions of identity.¹ In his vernacular writings, Estienne repeatedly claims that it is ‘l’honneur de la nation’ or ‘l’honneur de [la] patrie’ that has led him to assert the superiority of the French language over its rivals, notably Italian, and to seek to maintain its purity from foreign (primarily Italian) influence (Estienne 1579: fol. aii^r; Estienne 1853: 44; Estienne 1972). Study of Estienne enables us to explore both the archaeology of French linguistic purism and the origins of much of the terminology that modern scholars continue to apply – largely unselfconsciously – to the description of linguistic borrowing. In addition, Estienne mobilises, as David Hornsby has recently noted (1998), much of the persuasive and polemical arsenal marshalled by twentieth-century purists, and in particular René Etiemble in his *Parlez-vous franglais?* of 1964, in order to counter the perceived ‘threat’ of borrowing from Anglo-American. As is well known, Etiemble quotes a passage from Estienne’s *Traicté de la conformité du langage françois avec le grec* of 1565 as one of the appendices to *Parlez-vous franglais?*, alongside other attacks on language mixing (1991: 425-27). In the body of his text, a number of overt and covert references to

Estienne enable us to form a clear impression of the reasons for Etienne's admiration for his sixteenth-century forerunner, included in the group of humanists '[qui] durent se fâcher contre l'italianisation du langage français' (1991: 341) or indeed among the unnamed 'régents qui, au XVI^e, nous épargnèrent l'italianisation' (1991: 396). In view of the perceived success of this campaign against 'italianisation' (a process which Etienne does not clearly define), it is unsurprising to find, in the postscript written ten years after the work's first publication, an explicit endorsement of Estienne in the apparently self-deprecating phrase 'dans l'histoire de ma langue, si elle se prolonge, du moins suis-je assuré d'une modeste place, à côté d'Henri Estienne [...]' (1991: 402). Other modern writers are, however, less indulgent towards the tactics and techniques present in Estienne's major contributions to the debate on Italian linguistic influence, namely the *Traicté de la conformité du langage françois avec le grec* of 1565, the *Deux Dialogues du nouveau langage françois italianizé* of 1578 and the *Project du livre intitulé De la precellence du langage françois* of 1579. For some, such as T. E. Hope and David Hornsby, Estienne is an 'unrequited political theorist' (Hope 1971: 231; cf. Hornsby 1998: 333), mixing political, linguistic (and, indeed, religious) arguments in a disconcerting and ultimately unconvincing manner; for others, such as Louis Clément, author of a monumental study of Estienne's vernacular works published in 1898, and Ferdinand Brunot, the effectiveness of the *Deux Dialogues* is fatally undermined by its lack of structure and rambling, pedestrian nature (Clément 1898: 136; Brunot 1967: 203). Estienne's judgements on lexical borrowing from Italian are further criticised by scholars such as Peter Rickard for their failure to discriminate between pure 'affectations' attributed to italianising courtiers, and what Rickard calls 'quite unaffected loan-words of

¹ For a recent appreciation of Henri Estienne's output see *Henri Estienne* 1988.

real practical value' (1974: 93). Pierre Trescases draws attention to the fact that, of the 206 italianisms identified and, for the most part, denounced in the *Dialogues*, only 71 are listed by Hope as 'authentic' sixteenth-century borrowings (1978: 256-57, 260). Indeed, in much of the literature devoted to Estienne one senses the (generally unspoken) accusation that Estienne has invented a good deal of his own evidence. This impression is compounded by the unfortunate fact that Estienne only began to reside at the court of Henri III, an institution whose linguistic and other habits he had castigated with such vigour in the *Dialogues*, two years after the publication of that text (Clément 1898: 124). His linguistic information appears, then, to be at best second-hand.² In the light of this rather negative picture it may appear unpromising to attempt even a partial rehabilitation of Henri Estienne as a principled and, indeed, methodologically rigorous champion of the French language.³ In what follows I will, however, try to counter the twin accusations of disorganisation and falsification in two ways: first by drawing attention to the fact that much of Estienne's corpus of italianisms may indeed have been present in the code-switching of bilingual courtiers without ever acquiring the status of borrowings, and secondly by arguing that Estienne's vernacular works on borrowing gain considerable internal cohesion, both inter- and intra-textually, through their deployment of a set of metaphors that are consistently (and, indeed, insistently) used in order to characterise both the process of linguistic borrowing and those that practise it in ways that carefully appeal to the readership's 'common ground' (shared contextual information; see Gibbs

² This impression is compounded by the recent findings of Rodney Sampson, whose investigation of the scarcity of vowel prosthesis in Estienne's *Dialogues* points towards standard written Italian, and not contemporary spoken Italian, as the source for a significant number of Estienne's italianisms. See Sampson (2003 and 2004).

³ While criticising Estienne for his polemical approach to language, T. E. Hope (1971: 231) does concede that his linguistic sensitivity, which derives from his excellent knowledge of Italian, has frequently been under-rated.

1994: 113-14) and, by so doing, formulate and reinforce a set of negative stereotypes with considerable normative force. It will also be possible to note that a significant amount of the modern terminology of linguistic borrowing – itself frequently metaphorical in nature – is already present in Estienne's writings.

The circumstances in which Estienne made his contribution to the debate on Italian linguistic influence on French are well known, as are his biographical details, so I will resume both very briefly here.⁴ The son of Robert Estienne, the Parisian humanist scholar and printer to whom we owe the first printed French–Latin dictionary (published in 1540), Henri was forced to flee Paris and follow his father to Geneva in 1551 due to persecution of the adherents of the reformed religion by the Sorbonne. He took over his father's press on the latter's death in 1559 and proceeded, over the next forty years, to publish a prolific output of humanist and hellenist material. Interspersed among this learned output Estienne published the four works in the vernacular concerned, directly or indirectly, with contemporary questions of cultural and, more particularly, linguistic influence listed above. In the *Traicté de la conformité du langage françois avec le grec* of 1565, Estienne sets out the main themes of his later works, chief among them hostility towards those who, by introducing foreign words, adulterate the 'purity' of the French language. In view of the importance that questions of authority in language will assume in the later works, it is instructive to quote from a section of Estienne's dedicatory letter to Henri de Mesmes, the royal *maître des requêtes*, in which Estienne addresses the 'desordre et abus qui est aujourd'huy en l'usage de la langue françoise':

Car j'ay tousjours eu ceste opinion, que la cour estoit la forge des mots nouveaux, et puis le palais de Paris leur donnoit la trempe: et que le grand desordre qui est en nostre langage, procede, pour la pluspart, de ce que MM. les courtisans se donnent le privilege de legitimer les mots françois bastards, et naturalizer les estrangers (Estienne 1853: 14).

It is significant that there is not, as yet, any specific attack on borrowing from Italian, merely criticism of foreign terms *per se*; indeed, the preface to the *Conformité* appears even-handed in its condemnation of French that is 'italianizé' or 'espagnolizé' (Estienne 1853: 20). (We might compare this general distaste for borrowed words, whatever their provenance, with René Etiemble's denunciation of 'le babélien' in work anterior to *Parlez-vous franglais?*⁵) The royal court is, however, already identified as the centre of lexical innovation, expressed by means of the metaphor of the forge. Elsewhere in the preface, the ideological basis of Estienne's attempt to demonstrate the close linguistic relation between French and Greek is made clear. Not only is Greek 'la roine des langues', perfect in respect of its ease of pronunciation and its copious lexicon, 'il en preste à tous autres langages et n'en emprunte de pas un' (Estienne 1853: 18, 19). This it achieves through its facility in the creation of neologisms. The term 'loan word' is first attested in English, at least, in 1874, being a calque of the German *Lehnwort* (Haugen & Mithun 2003: 243).⁶ Estienne's use of the metaphor of word borrowing, which we might

⁴ For the life of Henri Estienne see, in addition to Clément (1898), Feugère (1853).

⁵ See, in particular, the published text of Etiemble's Sorbonne lectures from the years 1959-62 (Etiemble 1960-63).

⁶ The German term is described as 'eine junge, erst von neueren grammatikern [sc. the Neogrammarians] geschaffene bildung' in Grimm (1885). In French, the term *mot d'emprunt* would appear to date back to 1826 (Rey 2001).

view as part of the ‘prehistory’ of the modern term, undoubtedly preserves more of the economic flavour of the image when viewed in the context of the nascent mercantilism and protectionism of the later sixteenth century, when France’s linguistic, and specifically lexical, capital was seen as part of the country’s balance of payments, as the recent research of Philippe Desan (1992: 11; 1993: 92, 108-110) and Terence Cave (2001) has shown. Estienne’s use of metaphor will be discussed further below; in the present connection, however, it is surely significant that Estienne should choose Greek as the model of linguistic perfection that French is judged most closely to resemble. None could deny that Italian was closely related to Latin; by choosing a more prestigious language than Latin and, into the bargain, one that had been the source of much lexical and cultural borrowing into Latin, Estienne is attempting to outflank Italian humanists who, following Petrarch, claimed that the glory of ancient Rome was destined to return to Italy. This humanist rivalry with Italy, for which there is much evidence in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century French writing, finds further, more overt expression in Estienne’s celebrated polemic known as the *Apologie pour Hérodote* or, to give it its full title, the *Traité de la conformité des merveilles anciennes avec les modernes, ou Traité préparatif à l’Apologie pour Hérodote* of 1566.⁷ In this text, criticism of Italian influence on French morals is articulated, behind the pretence of a defence of the good faith and veracity of the Greek historian, through a series of scabrous anecdotes that present the Italian nation as morally degenerate and capable only of exporting curses, blasphemy, charlatanism, political assassination and every imaginable vice.⁸ This emphasis on the export of deplorable qualities and practices of course serves to justify Estienne’s identification of pejoratives,

⁷ See, most recently, Boudou (2000). The same scholar is currently preparing a new edition of the *Apologie* to supersede that of Paul Ristelhuber (Estienne 1879).

such as *charlatan*, *assassin* and *bouffon*, as the only acceptable category of lexical borrowing from Italian.⁹

By the time that Estienne came to write his famous attack on the affectations of the italianising courtiers of Henri III, the *Deux Dialogues du nouveau langage françois italianizé et autrement desguizé, principalement entre les courtisans de ce temps* in 1578, political relations between the Italian faction at the royal court, loyal to the Queen Mother, Catherine de Médicis, and French Protestants had worsened considerably in the aftermath of the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre of 24th August 1572, a religious pogrom during which at least 3,000 Huguenots were killed in Paris alone. Public opinion in France and, indeed, Calvinist Geneva generally held Catherine responsible for this 'crime italien'; Estienne had himself, in all probability, composed a polemical pamphlet denouncing the Italian queen in 1575 (Clément 1898: 31-40, 111). When viewed against the backdrop of such sectarian violence, Estienne's anti-Italian barbs do indeed appear to be a means of conducting a political and religious argument through the medium of metalinguistic comment. In what follows, however, I will attempt to assess whether his representation of linguistic usage at the French court has any value other than the purely polemical. The *Deux Dialogues* may be briefly resumed as follows: Celtophile, who (like Estienne himself) has spent a period away from Paris and the court, encounters his erstwhile friend Philausone ('lover of Italy'), now a modish courtier. The latter promises to initiate Celtophile into the new ways of the court but, in so doing, provokes an aggressive reaction: Celtophile expresses astonishment, and considerable vexation, at the

⁹ For anti-Italian satire in the *Apologie*, see Sozzi (1988).

number of lexical and other borrowings from Italian that his friend is using. Unable to resolve their dispute as to the acceptability of these forms unaided, the friends decide to submit it to the arbitration of a mutual friend, Philalethe ('lover of truth'). The second dialogue concludes with the judgement of Philalethe, which has the ring of inevitability about it: all Italian words are to be 'banished' within a period of three months, unless they can justify their presence in the French language. Philalethe's recourse to personification looks like wishful thinking: through their words, it is the Italian courtiers themselves who are being targeted, with the implication that they should be banished too. The political and religious dimension of Estienne's text is thus quite clear; but to what extent may it be viewed as an accurate record of language use at the court of Henri III?

Before attempting to answer this question, a number of caveats are necessary. As already stated, Estienne had no first-hand knowledge of the French royal court in 1578; secondly, the dialogue form, far from being a naturalistic genre in the sixteenth-century, had clear classical antecedents, chief among them the satirical dialogues of Lucian (an author whose work Estienne knew well), and had in all likelihood been chosen, as the text's modern editor, Pauline Smith, points out (Estienne 1980: 25), to enable the author, already facing a charge of obscenity in Geneva relating to the publication of the *Apologie pour Hérodote*, to maintain a prudent distance from the forthright comments of his characters. In addition, the dialogues are primarily metalinguistic in nature, with individual loanwords that have occurred in the speech of Philausone being discussed in turn with a consistent, and, given Estienne's humanist credentials, predictable emphasis

⁹ For the terms 'charlatan' and 'assassin', see Estienne 1879: I, 211, 353; Clément 1898: 137, 344; Estienne 1980: 22.

on etymology. The text is prefaced, however, by a letter reputedly written by Philausone (alias Jan Franchet) to his fellow courtiers setting out the argument of the book. This oft-quoted letter seems at first sight to be no more than a humorous attempt, much as René Etiemble was later to do in his ‘Histoire pas drôle’, to insert as many foreign borrowings as possible into an ostensibly ‘French’ text (Etiemble 1991: 25-46). Before dismissing the letter as a facile joke, however, it will be necessary to examine it more closely in order to establish the extent to which it conforms to observed patterns in real code-switching discourse.

JAN FRANCHET, DICT PHILAUZONE, gentilhomme courtesanopolitois, Aux
lecteurs tutti quanti.

Messieurs, il n’y a pas long temps qu’ayant quelque *martel in teste* (ce qui m’advient souvent pendant que je fay ma *stanse* en la cour), et, à cause de ce, estant sorti apres le *past* pour aller un peu *spaceger*, je trouvay par la *strade* un mien ami nommé Celtophile. Or, voyant qu’il se monstret estre tout *sbigotit* de mon langage (qui est toutesfois le langage courtesanesque, dont usent aujourd’huy les gentilshommes francés qui ont quelque *garbe*, et aussi desirent ne parler point *sgarbatement*), je me mis à *ragionner* avec luy touchant iceluy en le soustenant le mieux qu’il m’estet possible. Et voyant que, nonobstant tout ce que je luy poves alleguer, ce langage italianisé luy semblet fort *strane*, voire avoir de la *gofferie* et *balorderie*, je pris beaucoup de *fatigue* pour luy *caver* cela de la fantasie. Mais (pour vous dire la verité), je ne trouves point de raisons *bastantes* pour ce faire. Et, au contraire, tant plus je m’efforces de luy *lever* ceste opinion par mes

raisonnemens, tant plus luy se *burlet* de moy, se sentant bien assuré de son baston, ainsi qu'il monstret. En la fin, voyant que j'aves à faire à si forte partie, et que les repliques me commençoient à *manquer* (encore que je fisse bonne mine), j'acceptay fort volontiers pour arbitre Monsieur Philalethe, esperant qu'il y auret quelque *domestichesse* entre luy et ces mots qu'il oit souvent à la cour, et pourtant me feret *scorte*. Mais je trouvay que je *m'ingannes* bien. Car luy, au lieu de me *favoregger*, faiset aussi semblant d'estre tout *sbigotit*, et trouver je ne sçay quelle *salvatichesse* en ce langage escorché. Et tous deux m'alleguoyent tant de raisons (en me *rinfresquant* la memoire de plusieurs fautes qu'on commet) que je ne sçavez plus où j'en estes, tellement que je leur accordes, desaccordes, et puis raccordes ce qu'ils disoyent. Or, le pis est, que ces deux gentilshommes ont faict mettre en lumiere ce discours, ce que je n'eusse jamais pensé. Je vous prie donc les en advertir, sans leur dire toutesfois que je suis nommé en iceluy. Car je veux estre le premier qui leur declare, pour leur faire quand et quand mes excuses, et leur dire qu'ils ne doivent laisser d'estre de *bonne voglie*, d'autant qu'il s'en faut beaucoup que j'aye descouvert tout le pot aux roses. Et ce sera aussi tost que je seray sorti de quelque *intrigue* où je me suis trouvé, apres estre *capité* en ce lieu où il me faut *indugier* quelques jours. Ce-pendant *je leur baise la main*, et à vous aussi (Estienne 1980: 35-39; my italics).

A preliminary analysis of the linguistic features putatively borrowed from Italian (italicised in the quotation above) in this admittedly small sample reveals the following: nouns are the most frequent category (13 tokens), closely followed by verbs (11 tokens)

and then adjectives (7 tokens). There is one adverbial form, and at least two phrases calqued on an Italian original ('ayant quelque martel in teste'; 'je leur baise la main'). Of the nouns, two are first occurrences and three *hapax legomena*; six of the verbs are hapax, as are four of the adjectives (including the obviously ludic 'courtisanopolitois' and 'tutti quanti'). The adverb ('sgarbatement') is also a hapax form, unattested even in Italian in the sixteenth century. In addition, there is categorical use of the phoneme /E/ in first- and third-person singular imperfect and conditional tense endings, and in the adjective 'francés' for 'françois'. Notwithstanding the suggestion throughout the text that this phonemic variation has arisen due to Italian influence, Estienne had himself already declared in the *Apologie pour Hérodote* that this tendency had arisen in courtly circles through imitation of women who wished to avoid opening their mouth too widely, and, indeed, that the Italian pronunciation of such words as *Francese* and *Inglese* was in fact a borrowing of French usage. (It is most likely to have been a specifically Parisian phenomenon; see Estienne 1879: II, 135-36; Clément 1898: 309-11.) The high incidence of *hapax legomena* is open to more than one interpretation: on the one hand, the presence of such forms might suggest that Estienne was using his own imagination, and, indeed, excellent knowledge of the Italian language (abundantly documented elsewhere, e.g. Estienne 1853: 45-46) to 'enhance' his data;¹⁰ on the other, such forms might represent items commonly found in code-switching discourse used in courtly circles, but of limited diffusion beyond the bounds of the court. Indeed, as Carol Myers-Scotton has recently remarked (2002: 35), extensive code-switching involving the local language and a more prestigious variety, typically an international language such as English, characterises the

¹⁰ As has already been noted, the absence of vowel prothesis from the *Dialogues* suggests that Estienne is not merely recording the usage of the court. See Sampson (2004).

‘elite closure’ practised by the social elite in a number of developing countries. Estienne’s courtiers, like modern-day social elites, use their language choices as a means of maintaining existing boundaries between social groups, and of preserving their privileged access to wealth and prestige. This effect is particularly marked if, as was the case in sixteenth-century France, only a minority of the population have a command of the high-status variety. Indeed, it could be argued that Renaissance courtiers practised a kind of double elite closure, having exclusive access both to the high-status Parisian standard (Estienne’s linguistic ‘forge’) and to a prestigious foreign variety. This state of affairs would seem to have guaranteed the necessary ‘critical mass’ (in Myers-Scotton’s terminology) for extensive lexical borrowing to take place (2002: 238); indeed, Philaëthe remarks disapprovingly that the court has become ‘une petite Italie’ (Estienne 1980: 397, 417), with Italian courtiers and those who aspire to imitate them in a clear majority over courtiers having a measure of linguistic discernment based on some knowledge of classical languages, who are described as having ‘quelques lettres’ (Estienne 1980: 396). What is more, the high incidence of *hapax legomena* in Philausone’s letter is, perhaps, most readily understandable in the light of Myers-Scotton’s distinction (2002: 239) between ‘cultural’ and ‘core’ borrowings: whereas cultural borrowings, which fill lexical gaps and typically accompany technological or cultural innovations (or importations), may well occur in the speech of monolinguals ignorant of the donor language, core borrowings, which appear to duplicate existing words (with, of course, different pragmatic and semantic emphases), appear initially in bilingual code-switching and may be relatively ephemeral (indeed, they may occur singly) or be of limited diffusion. The relative quantities of the different grammatical categories present in the letter also bear

out the findings of modern studies of language contact: Myers-Scotton states (2002: 240) that the vast majority of borrowed elements are content morphemes, with nouns usually in the majority, followed by verbs, adjectives and then adverbs and prepositions; as in the case of modern borrowings from French into Dutch in Jeanine Treffers-Daller's Brussels corpus (Treffers-Daller 1999: 14-16; Myers-Scotton 2002: 244), all of Estienne's italianisms have acquired late system morphemes (e.g. suffixes and verb endings) from the matrix language, in this case French. The sole apparent exception to this process is the ostensibly humorous form 'tutti quanti', which is best viewed as an 'embedded language island', that is to say, a series of content morphemes that are well formed in the embedded language (here, Italian), but do not respect the morpho-syntax of the matrix language (Myers-Scotton 2002: 139-53). Borrowing of phonemic features is, on the other hand, extremely rare: we have, after all, already discounted the presence of /E/ as an italianism. (This distribution of grammatical categories may usefully be compared with another humorous example of sixteenth-century code-switching, François Rabelais' famous episode of the *écolier Limousin* (1946: 31-35).) It would thus appear that Philausone's letter, despite its avowedly fictional status, is as amenable to the type of analysis practised by students of language contact as any piece of 'authentic' discourse. It is therefore likely that, as Pierre Trescases has asserted (1978: 261), Estienne's work constitutes not an over-enthusiastic embroidering of the available data, but rather 'l'analyse d'un certain jargon de la cour ou même, en élargissant au maximum le débat, de celui d'une élite sociale'. Estienne's mouthpiece Philalethe himself echoes this view when he declares, at the end of the *Deux Dialogues*, that the phenomenon of linguistic mixing that the author has just spent four hundred pages denouncing has in fact

originated from the code-switching of Italians, who have subsequently been imitated by the French:

Or çà, Monsieur Philausone, pour parler à bon escient, ne considerez-vous pas bien que l'escorchement du langage italien est venu premierement des Italiens qui, par nécessité, non pas pour plaisir, entremesloyent leur langage parmi le nostre? Comme il me souvient leur avoir ouy dire quelquesfois: *Quand anderons-nous là?* Car qui est celuy qui voudroit dire que ce mot *anderons* fust mis en ce lieu comme ayant quelque garbe (pour parler courtisan) plus que le mot françois 'irons'? Et cependant quelque sot François, de ce vice (car je croy que l'ignorance se peut bien appeler vice) voudra faire une vertu. (Estienne 1980: 439)

Space does not permit a detailed study of Estienne's use of metaphor as a structuring device in his vernacular work, but, as the above extract demonstrates, it is a constant presence in his writing. The preface to the *Conformité* alone contains, along with the metaphorical reference to 'bastard' and foreign words quoted earlier, metaphors of food, taste and digestion; richness (of lexicon); extravagant dress, disguise, masking and make-up; curiosity and novelty; purity and simplicity; family relationships; economic exchange, including reference to linguistic bankruptcy and words as the currency of a country; forging; flaying, and relations between neighbours (the French are characterised as 'mauvais mesnagers' who borrow from their neighbours what they already have at home, cf. Estienne 1879: II, 137). To this impressive tally the *Deux Dialogues* add metaphors of sorcery; sickness and health; moral degeneracy; patriotism and its absence

(linguistic ‘lèse-majesté’); mixing (often in a culinary sense, as in the verb ‘entrelarder’) and a number of comparisons with animals (courtiers have asses’ ears, or resemble parrots that simply repeat what they hear without any understanding). It should be clear, even from such a summary list, that such metaphors are intended to elicit in the readership a series of predictable responses based on shared, largely self-evident knowledge in a number of domains of experience. What is striking is their tenacity: it would be easy to find examples of the use of identical or cognate images in the critical discourse of modern students of Estienne, and, indeed, of code-switching. Glanville Price refers to lexical borrowing in the fifteenth century as ‘larding’ and speaks of unnecessary ‘ornamentation’ (1971: 13); Peter Rickard speaks of the ‘affectations’ practised by Philausone (1974: 93), and Tony Lodge of language loyalty and betrayal (1993: 135). Carol Myers-Scotton evokes the ‘lure of novelty’ (2002: 243) and David Hornsby Estienne’s tendency to ‘pepper’ his text with italianisms (1998: 334). Perhaps the most loaded of all the metaphors, that of sickness and health, is of course developed by René Etiemble himself (see Hornsby 1998: 339). Despite his admittedly Canute-like efforts to hold back the tide of linguistic history and to assert a ‘pure’ French identity beleaguered by the perceived onslaught of Italian manners, Estienne’s lasting legacy would appear to be his enthusiastic elaboration of much of the current terminology of linguistic borrowing.

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