Integrating English Words into Gulf Arabic

Faeqa Alsadeqi, University of Bahrain, Bahrain

**Abstract:** Borrowings being elements of discourse analysis have been incorporated in works pertaining to Gulf Arabic, but the transformations that are governed by Arabic rules have not been studied extensively when English words are integrated into Gulf Arabic. This paper addresses this particular issue; how borrowed English words are integrated into Bahraini Arabic, via certain grammatical rules that surfaced through a study of bilingualism at the University of Bahrain. The statistics, examples, and part of the background information were taken from an earlier paper on bilingualism in 2000 and another comparative study in 2005 (Alsadeqi 2007). The corpus of the data on verb forms, pluralization and other transformations used is mostly from questionnaires administered to 725 students at the University of Bahrain, but additional interviews were conducted with other Bahrainis at a random basis to explore the generality of the results of this study. The changes that borrowed English words undergo are examined at the morphological level. With the borrowed English words, morphological changes are exhibited through the use of the Arabic definite article, pluralization, dual form, the idafa construction (possessive construction), adverbs and verb forms. Rules pertaining to the transformations are then listed. So far, when teaching Arabic (including dialects) traditional grammar rules concentrate on actual Arabic words. Through the findings in this paper, it is hoped that the borrowing rules are applied in teaching Gulf Arabic. It is also hoped that the findings of this papers will be compared to similar findings in other Arabic dialects, to see whether there are Arabic rules that apply to English borrowings in general. In this paper, Arabic represents the Gulf dialect spoken in Bahrain.

**Keywords:** Gulf Arabic, English language

**Introduction**

Borrowings in bilingual and multilingual communities are common, due to contact with other languages; Winford (2002:30) sees that such contact is marginal and may be due, among other factors, to “exposure to the donor language in the mass media, foreign language instruction and the like”. He also sees that lexical borrowing is motivated by the spread of global avenues of communication such as radio, television and the internet.

In Bahrain, the impact of the English language has become more evident than other languages that the population is exposed to, especially among certain groups such as university students, bankers and physicians. The influence of English borrowings on Bahraini Arabic has been present for quite sometime, but the role of globalization and the internet has reinforced it, a phenomenon observed in nations around the world (Winford 2002).

In a study of bilingualism among students in the University of Bahrain, which I conducted in 2000 and 2005, certain internalized grammatical rules surfaced when the students use borrowed English words and adapt them to spoken Arabic.
The internalized rules for borrowed English words will be discussed in this paper, to show how English and Bahraini Arabic converge, specifically at the morphological level. The focus will, therefore, be on the following:

a. Morphological changes in nouns and adjectives.
b. Verbs, and how they are inflected once borrowed from English

**Literature Review**

Discourse studies of Arabic, especially on bilingualism, have concentrated on code switching, mostly at the syntactic levels; Owens (2005) examined data from Nigerian Arabic using a form of Chomsky’s minimalist approach (although he was more concerned with quantitative results) and so did Mustafa and Al-Khatib (1994) and Hussein (1999) when they examined code mixing and code switching in Jordanian Arabic. Studies were also conducted on Arabic-French code switching by Bentahila and Davies (1983). There are some studies on Middle Eastern Arabic as well (Zughoul, 1978; Eid, 1985; Mohamad, 1989; Smart, 1990; Daher, 1992; Rouchday, 1992; Safi, 1992; Barhoom, 1994; Hafez, 1996). As for the Gulf variety of Arabic, a few studies have been conducted; examples are Abu-Haider (1988) on borrowing and code switching in Iraqi Arabic, Findlow (2006) on linguistic cultural dualism in the Arab Gulf, Al-Saqqaf (2006) on loanwords used in Hadrami Arabic (in Yemen), Smeaton (1973) on loanwords used by the people of Al-Hasa in Saudi Arabia, but the most extensive work on this variety of Arabic was undertaken by Holes (1981, 1987, 1990, 2001). Yet most of the work on Gulf Arabic was of descriptive nature and focussed on general usage of Arabic in conversation without examining the impact of its grammar on borrowings save the work by Hafez (1996).

**Background**

Due to its geographical location in the Gulf, Bahrain was always a transient island, especially with merchants, who made frequent stops there while conducting business in the Middle East. The Bahraini people were influenced by Hindi and Persian in particular (representing minority groups), and we find many borrowed words such as bänka ‘fan’ čarrāxa ‘mixer’ that have become part of Arabic. Smart (1990) confirms that many loanwords in the Gulf dialect come from English, Persian and Urdu. The influence of the English language came later in the nineteenth century, when Bahrain became a British protectorate in 1861, and continued into the twentieth century, even after Bahrain became independent in December 1970. This naturally led to English borrowings to serve daily purposes. Words such as tiksi ‘taxi’, drēwel ‘driver’, baas ‘bus’, sagnal ‘to signal’ are often heard when Bahrainis speak Arabic, regardless of their social positions, jobs or ethnic background.

In the late eighties, Bahrain flourished into a financial centre for banks and offshore companies that favour the use of English. This led to more borrowings such as kansal ‘to cancel’, ček ‘cheque’, which again became part of everyday Arabic.

With British presence, English was taught as a second language in schools, further enhancing the use of some English words among the people. This trend continues until this day, but has
become more prominent with the opening of universities in the late seventies and the advent of computers and the internet.

The majority of students enrolled in universities in Bahrain is or has become bilingual. Since their exposure to English begins at school, they usually have no problem developing their English language skills in colleges where English is the medium of instruction. The extent to which English influences their speech depends on their area of specialization, their background or their language preferences. Three groups of students were found as far as language usage is concerned: those who prefer using English instead of Arabic, occasionally using Arabic works (L2 users), those who use Arabic for communication but infuse it with borrowed English words (L1 users or monolinguals) and code switchers who use Arabic and English simultaneously (L1-L2 users or code switchers). Code switching (CS) in this context and in general terms, is alternating between two or more languages while speaking (Crystal 1987, Grosjean 1982:145). CS is a by product of bilingualism. In recent years, it has been subdivided into different levels (Myers-Scotton 2002). These subdivisions will not be discussed because they are beyond the scope of this paper. Classification of the students into these groups was based on their language preference, not their proficiency, since most of them are probably bilingual or multilingual to various degrees.

The code switching group represents around 23% of the students that were involved in the questionnaires administered at the University of Bahrain. The majority is enrolled in the departments of Business Administration, Computer Sciences, Engineering, Science, and English.

Code switchers' usage of English and Arabic (interchangeably) was 50-50, in the group that participated in the 2005 questionnaire and the interviews. The language of this group indicates that “the native language and the second language are complementary rather than mutually exclusive” (Hakuta 1990). This usage, however, might shift to favour one language over the other, depending on how a conversation is initiated. For example, if a student starts his/her conversation in English, then less Arabic is used and vice versa. In other words, the students follow a pattern in CS and know when it is appropriate to use two languages separately or when to mix them. Skiba (1997) stresses that CS performs a socio-linguistic function, i.e it is environment and group specific. Skiba’s statement seems to be accurate, because students in this group do not code switch if they encounter groups that do not share the same view of language, i.e., they switch back to either Arabic or English depending on who they are talking to.

The example below illustrates a typical exchange with CS

Student A : sawwēti zēn fil exam. Was it difficult?
‘Did you do well in the exam? Was it difficult?’
Student B: I don't know, inšâlla ayīb bi. How about you?
‘I don't know. I hope to get a B. How about you?
Student A : yimkin ba'ad B. bas we still have English 250.
‘Maybe a B also, but we still have English 250.’
Student B: I know, lat dakkrīni.
‘I know. Don't remind me.’
It seems that the response is initiated in the language that ends the preceding term of speech, i.e., if speaker A ends his utterance in English, then speaker B starts his response in English and then switches to Arabic and so forth. Skiba (1997) views these moves as patterns that are the established norm for that particular group (here, the students) and serve to ensure appropriate language use. Furthermore, this group separates the two grammars (English and Arabic). According to Duran (1994), bilinguals do learn to separate their languages but sometimes they choose not to.

Students of the L1 group are the largest in comparison to the other two groups (L2 users and code switchers), standing at 69%. Perhaps they prefer Arabic because they are enrolled in programmes where the medium of instruction is Arabic. Indeed, most of them are in the departments of Arabic and Islamic Studies, Social Sciences, and Education. While conversing in Arabic, they tend to use English words that are largely of academic or technical nature. When asked in the questionnaire why they do not use English, some of the students were surprised; 89% said that Arabic is their native tongue and they use English only when they have to; 6% said it is easier to use than English and 5% said they did not feel comfortable with English. Students in this group are bilingual to various degrees of proficiency in English; some speak it fluently, others can barely manage to express themselves or communicate in it.

The L1 users are not code switchers because the borrowed English words they use have become part of the Arabic language. Since most of the words are of technical or academic nature, students prefer to integrate them into Arabic, especially if there are no equivalent forms or proper translations for them. Borrowings occur in the speech of bi- or multilinguals (Mustafa and Al-Khatib, 1994: 217).

The data shows that the students, especially the L1 users (the borrowers) and L1/L2 user (code switchers) apply Arabic grammatical rules to the English words in context, or adapt them to Arabic morphologically and phonologically. Myers-Scotton (2002:240) states that statistics about borrowings show that more nouns are borrowed from other languages than any other category (such as adjectives, verbs or adverbs). In the case of the students involved in my study, almost all the English words borrowed were either nouns or verbs.

It is important to note here that often borrowings and loanwords are used interchangeably. According to Myers-Scotton (2002:234), “borrowings were recognized as mostly lexical items and came to be known as loanwords”, but Haugen (1950) confines borrowings to those loanwords that undergo change once adopted by another language. Gumperz (1982:66) also considers a word to be a borrowing if it adapts to the grammatical system of the borrowing language, thus becoming part of the lexicon. This paper will treat borrowings as those that undergo change to accommodate usage in Gulf Arabic.

**Grammatical Rules in English Borrowings**

MacSwan (1999: 235) views borrowing as ‘an operation whereby a new stem is introduced into a specific lexicon where morphologically complex items are formed before entering the numeration’. This is to say, if any foreign word is introduced into a language, it will probably undergo changes before it becomes an acceptable lexical item in the matrix language. MacSwan (2000:51) also states that “the language faculty has a Lexicon, which
includes internal morphological rules of word formation”. In the case of borrowing, morphological rules of the matrix language influence word formation.

The influence of Arabic - here being the matrix language - on English borrowings is evident through morphology and to a lesser extent, through phonology. Usually, for a borrowing to be acceptable in Arabic, it has to undergo some phonological changes before being integrated (Since this paper addresses the issue of integration at the morphological level, no reference will be made to phonology) the With borrowed nouns, the data used showed that the Arabic definite article was used; when students were asked in questionnaires to pluralize them or use them in dual form, they used the Arabic feminine plural ending and the Arabic dual ending; the construction called idafa (possessive construction) in Arabic was also frequently encountered in the data collected from the interviews and questionnaires. Arabic verb patterns were prevalent in the data as well. Adjectives and adverbs used as borrowings also occurred in the data but to a lesser extent. These are discussed below.

a. The Definite Article

In Arabic, the definite article *il* is prefixed to nouns. When English nouns are borrowed, the same prefix is used *e.g.* *il*-bank ‘the bank’ and *il*-video ‘the video’.

The Arabic feminine plural *āt* is a suffix used with most feminine nouns. When English nouns are borrowed, this morpheme is usually suffixed to indicate pluralization of the borrowed word, *e.g.* *file-āt* ‘files’ *disc-āt* ‘discs’. Both seem to be lexical insertion features found in other Arabic dialects; Owens (2005:26) found the same operations with English borrowings in Nigerian Arabic.

With some students, when using the definite article, the sound of the letter ‘l’ is assimilated to the first letter of the English word if it is a sun letter, *i.e.*, coronal consonant, just as in Arabic Sun letters or coronal consonants in Arabic comprise dentals, sibilants and liquids and when the definite article precedes them, the /l/ sound in ‘il’ is assimilated to them (Wright, 1986).

Examples 2, 3 and 4 (below) show this assimilation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Borrowing</th>
<th>Arabic form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2) Semester:</td>
<td><em>il</em>-semester or <em>is</em>-semester ‘the semester’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Short</td>
<td><em>il</em>-short <em>iš</em>-short ‘the short’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Role</td>
<td><em>ir</em>-role ‘the role’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Toast</td>
<td><em>it</em>-toast ‘the toast’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If nouns start with letters other than the sun letters, then there is no assimilation when the definite article is prefixed. Following are some examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Borrowing</th>
<th>Arabic form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6) Course:</td>
<td><em>il</em>-course ‘the course’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>il</em>-course-āt ‘the courses’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7) Class</td>
<td><em>il</em>-class ‘the class’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>il</em>-class-āt ‘the classes’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8) Video</td>
<td><em>il</em>-video ‘the video’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>il</em>-video-āt ‘the videos’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9) Computer</td>
<td><em>il</em>-computer ‘the computer’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>il</em>-computer-āt ‘the computer’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Myers-Scotton (2002:115) noted that when Dutch words are used in Moroccan Arabic, they were mostly bare (no determiner) and occasionally appeared with the Arabic definite article. In contrast, she found that in North African Arabic, borrowed French words do appear with the French definite article *le* (2002:116). In Bahraini Arabic in my study, however, the English nouns in most cases appeared with the Arabic definite article *il*. This does not mean that bare forms are not used or unusual; the syntax determines whether a borrowed word can be definite or indefinite, e.g.

10) *hay* computer *yīdīd*
   - this computer new
   - ‘this is a new computer’

11) *šarēt* mobile *yīdīd ams*
   - Bought I mobile new yesterday
   - ‘I bought a new mobile (phone) yesterday’

The functions of definite articles are to mark nouns that were previously mentioned and to mark “unique and generic reference” (Owens: 2005:27).

### b. Pluralization:

In Arabic dialects, the feminine sound plural marker *āt* occurs as a suffix with feminine nouns, while the masculine sound plural marker *‘in*’ appears with masculine nouns. However, with borrowings, usually the feminine sound plural is found as shown below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Borrowing</th>
<th>Plural</th>
<th>English equivalent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12) disk-<em>āt</em></td>
<td>‘discs’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13) video-<em>āt</em></td>
<td>‘videos’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14) printer-<em>āt</em></td>
<td>‘printers’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15) class-<em>āt</em></td>
<td>‘classes’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16) fuse-<em>āt</em></td>
<td>‘fuses’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17) lift-<em>āt</em></td>
<td>‘lifts’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Again a few exceptions occur: when asked to pluralize some English words a few of the students (2%) used the broken plural, which is another form of pluralization in Arabic; in broken plurals or “*pluralis fractus*”, the singular noun is altered by the addition or elision of consonants or the change of vowel (Wright, part II, 1986). Here are some examples (the first plural in the last column is sound and the alternative plural is broken):

| 18) ‘tyre’            | *tāyir*       | ‘tyres’            | *tāyirāt* or *tawāyir* |
| 19) ‘bill’            | *bīl*         | ‘bills’            | *biilāt* or ‘abyāl*   |
| 20) ‘chapter’         | *čapēr*       | ‘chapters’         | *čaptarāt* or less frequently *čapātir* |
| 21) ‘section’         | *sekšan*      | ‘sections’         | *sakāšin*             |

One percent of the students, however, retained the English plural ending with ‘s’, provided it was used with the definite article *il*.

22) *il*-computers     | ‘the computers’|
23) *il*-papers        | ‘the papers’   |
The pluralization process in English borrowings was to a certain extent also found by Owens in Nigerian Arabic. Owens (2005:27-28) found three plural markings for lexical insertions: the English plural morpheme’s’ (as in examples 22 to 24), the feminine plural suffix (as in examples 12 to 17) and no suffix (Ø). The data in this study differs from Nigerian Arabic in two respects: English borrowings in the plural do not occur without a plural marking and broken plurals may also be used with borrowings. However, Hafez's study of borrowings in Egyptian Arabic (1996) and Smeaton's study of Saudi Arabia's Al-Hasa dialect (1973) matched the pluralization of English words in Bahraini Arabic. Hafez (1996) sees that the choice between a sound plural or a broken plural of borrowings depends on the speakers' linguistic preference due to their background, education and attitude to bilingualism.

c. The Dual Form

In addition to the plural form, Bahraini as well as other dialects (based on my observation) uses the dual form, which has no equivalent in English. This is done via the suffix ēn. The students as well as the people interviewed were asked to use the dual form with the same words used for the plurals. The same process was found, i.e., chapter + ē 'two chapters', tyre + ēn 'two tyres', etc.

d. The Idafa Construction.

Another interesting usage in Arabic is the idafa construction (the possessive construction), which is roughly equivalent to the English morphological possessive ‘s. This construction has a minimum of two constituents in Arabic and is realized in two ways in standard Arabic and Arabic dialects:

- Type A: an indefinite noun + a pronominal suffix
  e.g. kūb-he book-her ‘her book’, kūb-hum book-their ‘their book’
- Type B: an indefinite noun + a definite (sometimes indefinite) noun.
  e.g. kūb ixtī book-sister-my ‘my sister’s book
      kūb ʾimlāʾ book-dictation ‘a dictation book’

In type A, the English borrowing is the first term of idafa (indefinite noun) and the suffix is in Arabic, e.g. sekšan-ak ‘your section’, klās-ne ‘our class’.

In type B where both terms of idafa are nouns, the speaker switches one word to English in the idafa construction, but rarely both; for example, when a student wishes to say ‘the English class’, he or she would say:

25) ‘The English class’  šaffīl English or class-il inglīzi,  
but not* class il- English.
26) ‘summer course’  course il-šēf or fašlīl –summer  
but not* course il-summer.
Owens (2005:27), however, found that in Nigerian Arabic the two terms of the idafa construction can be borrowings provided they are both bare forms. He cites the following example:

27) *hu bas* –*kampeen masta hal abasanjo*
   He just campaign manager of Obasanjo
   ‘He is the campaign manager of Obasanjo’.

**e. Adjectives**

Borrowed English adjectives found in the data were few. Once used, they do not undergo any changes. However, their usage is restricted to equational sentences where they serve as complements, as shown below:

28) *alwānā wājid* cheap
   ‘colours-its very cheap
   ‘its colours are very cheap

29) *il-film kān kililiš* fantastic
   ‘the-film was totally fantastic’ (the word order does not change in the English translation of this example)

In non-equational sentences or nominal sentences (sentences not containing verbs), the adjective does follow a noun in Arabic sentences or utterances, unlike English. The data showed that in cases like these, no English borrowing is used; for example, no constructions such as *bēt* beautiful ‘house beautiful’ = ‘a beautiful house’ were found’.

**f. Adverbs:**

One frequently used adverb is ‘already’ which has no equivalent in Arabic. Perhaps that is why the Bahrainis position it exactly as it is in English, i.e., initial, middle or final position of a sentence:

30) Already *kint ta'bān*
   ‘Already was-I tired
   ‘Already I was tired’

31) *xalast il wājib* already
   Finished-I the- homework already
   ‘I’ve finished the homework already’

32) Samar already *rāhat il bēt.*
   Samar already went-she the home
   ‘Samar already went home’

**g. Verbs**

When using English verbs, two kinds of conjugations were found as follows:
- In monosyllabic verbs, an auxiliary Arabic verb *sawwa* ‘make or do’ is used with the English borrowing as follows:
33) Drop  
\[sawwēt \text{ drop}\]  
I (did or made) a drop ‘I dropped’

34) Check  
\[sawwā \text{ check}\]  
he (did or made) a check ‘he checked’

35) Page  
\[sawwat \text{ page}\]  
she (did or made) a page ‘she paged’

36) Shift  
\[sawwat \text{ shift}\]  
she (did) a shift

One exception to this rule was found when using the English verbs ‘file’ and ‘type’ where many students tend to arabize them:

37) ‘I filed’  
\[fayyalt \text{ or sawwēt fayl}\]

38) ‘I typed’  
\[tayyapt \text{ or sawwēt tayp}\]

This variation in the conjugation is because both verbs contain a diphthong, the only phonological difference between these two verb and other monosyllabic verbs in the data. It should also be noted that diphthongized English words such as ‘page’ undergo vowel reduction in Arabic and therefore have one conjugation. In Arabic, ‘page’ is pronounced /pej/ and has one conjugation ‘sawwēt pej’ ‘I paged’.

- if the verb has two syllables, then it retains its English form (with vowel changes) but with all permissible Arabic conjugations in the dialect as follows (the alternative forms are based on dialectal variations):

39) Cancel  
\[kansalt\]  
‘I cancelled’
\[kansalne\]  
‘we cancelled’
\[kansalt\]  
‘you cancelled’ (masc. sing)
\[kansalti\] or \[kansaltīn\]  
‘you cancelled’ (fem. Sing)
\[kansalaw\] or \[kansaltūn\]  
‘you cancelled’ (pl.l)
\[kansal\]  
‘he cancelled’
\[kansilat\] or \[kansalat\]  
‘she cancelled’
\[kansilaw\] or \[kansalaw\]  
‘they cancelled’

40) Signal  
\[sagnalt\]  
‘I signaled’
\[sagnalne\]  
‘we signaled’
\[sagnalt\]  
‘you signaled (masc. sing)
\[sagnalit\] or \[sagnalīn\]  
‘you signaled (fem. sing)
\[sagnalaw\] or \[sagnalīn\]  
‘you signaled (pl.)
\[sagnal\]  
‘he signaled’
\[sagnilat\] or \[sagnalat\]  
‘she signaled’
\[sagnilaw\] or \[sagnalaw\]  
‘they signaled’

If, however, the English verb contains more than two syllables, then it is reduced to two syllables in its new Arabic form and then conjugated:

41) Telephone  
\[talfan\]  
‘he telephoned’
\[talfinat\]  
‘she telephoned’

**h. Verb Patterns**

The following morphological adaptations were found in the data:
1. If a verb consists of three syllables, it is reduced to two syllables when used in its Arabic form provided it is of the form cv-cv-cvvc. An example is the verb ‘telephone’ which in Arabic becomes talfan (cvc-cvc) and not talifan* (cv-cv-cvc).

2. If the English verb is other than the type mentioned in (1) above, a noun is used instead. For example, the word ‘register’ (cv-cvc-cvc) is not used as a verb but as a noun, the student would say sawwēt registration ‘I made a registration’. Hafez (1996) found that in Egyptian Arabic the word tellexrāf ‘telegraph’ is not reduced and used as a noun instead with an auxiliary, a usage similar to ‘register’ in my data. Telegraph is of the form (cv-cv-ccvvc).

Conclusion

This study has presented some general rules pertaining to borrowed English words used among Bahraini students. As in any language, there are exceptions to rules and this is typical of Arabic, regardless of the origin of the words. The general trend is that borrowed words are integrated into Arabic as follows:

- Rich morphology is applied to borrowed words, as in the case of verbs.
- Exceptions to rules include that there might be two plural forms for a word, and that Arabic broken plural rules may also apply to borrowings.

It is hoped that the abovementioned processes are taken into consideration when teaching the Gulf dialect. The grammar of a language is not restricted to actual Arabic words; if a borrowing becomes part of the language, then additional rules pertaining to them should also be taught. It is also hoped that the said processes can be looked at in all Arabic dialects, which, based on my limited observation of other dialects, probably employ the same mechanism as Bahraini Arabic, thus the integration process can be somewhat unified for all Arabic dialects.

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