ENGLISH LOANWORDS IN POLISH AND THE QUESTION OF GENDER ASSIGNMENT

In borrowing and code-switching situations in which the host language has a grammatical gender and the donor language does not, speakers are faced with the problem of assigning a borrowed noun to a specific gender category. In this paper I examine gender assignment in English loanwords among Polish speakers in the United States (English has no grammatical gender and Polish has three). I argue that, contrary to the claims of some studies (Arndt 1970, Poplack et al. 1982), inter-speaker variation in loanword gender assignment, as well as variation within the speech of a single speaker, does exist, and the study of such variation has implications for phonological, morphological, and sociolinguistic theory.

Variation among Polish speakers in assigning gender to English nouns may be attributed to the different results of the competition between two forces: the gender of the Polish equivalent or near-equivalent, and the phonological shape of the loanword, whenever they are in opposition. For example, the words *brace* (as in *knee brace*) and *space* were treated as masculine by speaker A, but as feminine by speaker B. When asked to translate English phrases or sentences into Polish, excluding the target word, the speakers produce the following responses (gender can be coded in nominal inflection and modifier agreement):

Speaker A: (1) ten brace który nosi_am na kolanie
this (masc.nom.) brace which (masc.nom.) I wore on knee
(2) Mo_ e ty nie potrzebujesz w_asnego space'u, ale ja tak.
Maybe you don't need your own (masc.gen.) space (masc.gen.), but I do.

Speaker B: (1) ta brace któr_ mam na kolanie
this (fem.nom.) brace which (fem.nom.) I have on knee
(2) Mo_ e ty nie potrzebujesz swojej w_asnej space, ale ja tak.
Maybe you don't need your own (fem.gen.) space, but I do.

When asked to translate the target words, speaker B translates *brace* as "bransoletka" (feminine) and *space* as "przestrze_ " (feminine). Speaker A, who treats these words as masculine, translates them as neuter equivalents: *brace* is "usztywnienie" (neuter) and *space* is "miejsce" (neuter). In Polish, neither feminine nor neuter nouns can end in -s. Feminine nouns can end in other sibilants, such as -c [_], -sz [_], -cz [_], -_ [_] and -_ [_], and one may hypothesize that for speaker B, who associates the loanwords with feminine equivalents, the phonological consideration of the lack of -s feminine endings in Polish is more easily overridden. No neuter nouns end in consonants, however, so the -s ending of the loanwords which speaker A associates with neuter equivalents overrides the semantic consideration, and instead the speaker opts for the masculine, which in this case is the default unmarked gender.

Another question is the role of nominal inflection in loanword gender assignment. Below are four examples of variation depending on nominal case within the speech of the same speaker:

English noun	Polish equivalent	Nominative	Genitive
message	wiadomo__ (fem)	feminine (message)	masculine (message'u)
dish	danie (neuter)	neuter (dish)	feminine (dish *not* *dish'a)

case (of wine)	skrzynka (fem)	masculine (case)	feminine (case'y)
street	ulica (fem)	feminine (street)	masculine (street'a)

Again, it seems that faithfulness to the phonological constraints of the Polish nominal inflection competes here with the faithfulness to the semantic gender, which is decided for the bare form based on its phonological shape and the gender of the Polish equivalent. In this paper I discuss in detail a number of examples of such variation, addressing their relevance for the theoretical analyses of phonological and morphological variation in monolingual speech, for example Steriade (1999) and Anttila (1997).

The mechanisms behind loanword gender assignment have been addressed in previous studies (Haugen 1969, Arndt 1970, Beardsmore 1971, Poplack et al. 1982, Rabeno and Repetti 1997), all of which have identified a number of factors that come into play, including the gender of the host language semantic equivalent and association with the phonological shape of a class of host language words. However, these treatments leave some questions unanswered. Haugen (1969) and Beardsmore (1971) point to gender assignment variation among speakers, suggesting reasons such as host language dialectal background, educational level, and the degree of loanword assimilation, but they do not analyze the operation of these factors within an indivual grammar. Arndt (1970) and Poplack et al. (1981) deny that such variation exists at all within a single speech community. Poplack et al. argue that once gender is assigned to a loanword by some combination of criteria, "there is generally unanimous agreement among speakers" (25). While this claim may be supported by Poplack et al.'s data, it does not explain the variation found in other studies, including this one. In my study speakers not only differ in gender assignment among each other, but they make inconsistent judgments depending on the case of the noun. This introduces a new factor in loanword gender assignment: the influence of the host language nominal inflection.

All the previous studies have relied on statistical analyses of large numbers of speakers, looking for patterns in the behavior of loanwords already recognizable by the entire speech community. In contrast, I focus on the bilingual speech of six speakers, which allows for an intensive study of their borrowing behavior, including testing their gender assignment judgments repetitively for the same word in different contexts, testing their judgments for single-lexeme code switches which they have never used or heard before, and interviewing them about their own interpretation of the gender assignment process. This approach offers insight into the factors contributing to the computation of gender assignment at the individual level, including phonological and morphological constraints, and context-sensitive sociolinguistic considerations. Poplack et al. (1982) reject the proposition that any sociolinguistic factors play a role in loanword gender assignment. However, speakers are often consciously aware of the gender assignment process, and express explicit concern for whether they are "correctly" inflecting the loanwords. This is especially evident in the different results between spontaneous speech and elicited judgments. In the paper, I address the role of such sociolinguistic motivations in the process of gender assignment.