

Café vs Coffee Shop: A Sociolinguistic Approach to Investigating How Perceptions of French Loanwords Relate to Perceptions of the French Culture

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Motivation of this Study

Loanwords are abundant in English, with those from French taking up a big portion. However, their use goes beyond lexical borrowing, as they demonstrate interesting interfaces between language users and different cultures. Backed by both quantitative and qualitative empirical evidence, this study examines the sociolinguistic value of loanwords and explores how different participants and various speech communities perceive them and why. Additionally, this study examines how loanwords are leveraged in marketing to influence and persuade consumers. By understanding these linguistic choices, we can explore the tactics that make communication more effective and how they evoke different responses depending on the audience.

1.2 The Hypotheses of this Study

- 1) When a reader sees a loanword, the feelings evoked are related to the reader's perception of the donor language/culture (the language from which the loanword is borrowed).
- 2) These feelings are also related to the participants' exposure to English and French.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework (eFigure 1)

2.1.1 *Ethos & Linguistic Capital: Using Loanwords to Persuade & Portray Certain Images*

According to Aristotle, "ethos" is a means of persuasion based on the communicator's credibility. French is often perceived as a symbol of sophistication and higher status, which might be leveraged in advertising settings (Aristotle, n.d.).

Pierre Bourdieu introduced Linguistic Capital, referring to the value assigned to certain ways of speaking. This is related to French loanwords for two reasons: Firstly, French loanwords entered English after the Norman Conquest in the 11th Century, with French becoming the language of the ruling class. Secondly, French loanwords are considered prestigious in fields like fashion and cuisine due to France's expertise in these fields (Pope, 2004).

2.1.2 *Semiotics & Indexicality*

There are two parts of the signified meaning of signs (words) (De Saussure, 2011). Denotation, the literal meaning of the word, and connotation, the implied/related meaning. For

instance, the denotation of “champagne” is the sparkling wine; connotations might be celebration, elegance, and luxury.

Indexicality refers to how a word, phrase, or sign "points to" certain aspects of the context in which it is used. Ex: The usage of French loanwords can signal an affiliation with luxury. This is crucial because it considers that meaning derived from texts is not only reliant on the words but also upon ideas dominant in the wider culture of which they are a part.

2.1.3 *Structuralism: The Principle of Difference*

The principle of difference in this context is the theory that words are given meaning by their differences from other words. Ex: *Boutique* might be seen as more exclusive or high-end compared to *shop* because of the differences these words carry within the system of English.

2.1.4 *Sociolinguistics*

Speech communities refer to groups of people who share a common set of linguistic norms, which often reflect their shared cultural values. This study responds to the hypotheses by analyzing data based on different speech communities.

2.2 Existing Research

2.2.1 *General trends of research*

1. Etymological analysis of French loanwords throughout the history

Roth conducted a study focusing on French loanwords (FL) during the Middle English and Early Modern English eras, the Anglo-French language and French influence on derivational morphology (Roth, 2010). Jóhannsdóttir studies semantically equivalent sets of FL and native English words. For example, sheep/cow/pig versus mutton/beef/pork (Jóhannsdóttir, 2011). The differences exist because the French-speaking ruling class often speak of them in the context of cuisines, while peasants use these words to refer to livestock.

2. Loanwords and their implications

Hock & Joseph discussed that the use of loanwords is motivated by either the need to fill lexical gaps or to signal prestige (Hock & Joseph, 2009). Zenner et al. (Zenner et al., 2019) explored the social meaning potential of loanwords by introducing “first-order indexicality” and “second-order indexicality”. The former is used to state the

idea that loanwords index certain social groups; the latter discusses how loanwords evoke broader societal perceptions linked to these groups, such as the sense of sophistication.

3. Language attitudes towards loanwords

From South Koreans’ attitudes toward English loanwords in Korean (Rüdiger, 2018), to Frenchs’ attitudes toward English loanwords in French (Barffour, 2016), native speakers often view loanwords incorporated into their mother tongue negatively for their dislike towards others using loanwords to intentionally show-off.

2.2.2 Gaps this study aims to fill

The following are gaps I noticed and aim to fill with this current study:

1. The relationship between individuals’ perceptions of the origin of loanwords and their perceptions of the loanwords themselves remains unclear.
2. While there is already an objective analysis of etymological and historical differences between French loanwords and their English equivalents, there is little insight regarding how people’s subjective reactions differ when seeing the two.
3. There is also little research focussing on how people’s opinions differ when seeing French loanwords used in different contexts.
4. There is little research on the interesting aspect of sociolinguistics, which is the relationship between people’s reactions to loanwords and their different characteristics, such as their proficiencies/exposure to borrowing and lending languages.

* each set of content includes 2 texts, respectively with & without French loanwords (FL) *

PART				
CONTENT	2 Sentences	2 Articles	2 Cafe Advertisements	Collecting Demographic Info
AIMS TO UNDERSTAND	how French loanwords are perceived in shorter texts.	how French loanwords are perceived in longer texts.	how people perceive FL in real-life context & how FL can be leveraged to persuade in marketing. *two ads have same design	how different speech communities perceive the use of FL

FIGURE 1: *Overview of the design of the questionnaire*

3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Questionnaire

The key theme of the questionnaire is comparing sets of two texts with the same meaning, except that one includes French loanwords, and the other doesn't. See [Figure 1](#).

3.2 Analyzing Data

After stating the results of each part, there will be general analyses, followed by analyses more specifically dealing with different speech communities and the hypotheses of this study.

4. RESULTS & ANALYSES

This study collected 62 responses in total. ([eTable 1](#))

4.1 Results ([eFigure 2](#))

1. Part I of the survey (sentences): The sentence with French loanwords (S2) was given a 44% higher rating (preference) compared to the one without French loanwords (S1) on average.
2. Part II of the survey (articles): Similar to the results of Part I, 70% of participants chose the article with FL (Article A) when they were asked which one sounded more sophisticated. However, 58% of participants liked the one without FL (Article B) better, which is 26% more than those who liked Article A (32%). When asked which article was more modern, 54% of participants chose Article B, surpassing Article A (32%) by 22%.
3. Part III of the survey (café advertisements): The ad with FL (representing a place named The Elite Café) was regarded as more sophisticated and high-class compared the one without FL (named The Select Coffee Shop). Many participants also reported that they expect higher prices and better decor/atmosphere at the Elite Café. However, when asked about in which place they “expect better food quality” and “expect better customer service”, a quite significant number of participants remained neutral.

At the end of this part of the questionnaire, participants are also asked whether they agree that the posters of the respective cafés were snobbish/pretentious on a scale of 1(disagree) to 5 (agree). The average number to the question for The Elite Café was 3.1; for The Select Coffee Shop, it was a much lower 1.8.

4.2 General Analyses

4.2.1 Part I & Part II of the Questionnaire (sentences & articles)

1. The results indicate that excessive use of FL might lead to a decrease in readability, along with likability. Although this stands true for both sentences and articles, it is even more

obvious with the latter. This may stem from the longer length of articles compared to the sentences in part one of the survey, causing a more significant decrease in readability.

2. When asked about their impression of France/the French culture, answers from 5 participants included expressions like “history” and “historical”. It is highly likely the reason why more people thought the article without French loanwords was more modern.

4.2.2 Part III of the Questionnaire

1. When used in an advertising context, loanwords can effectively convey how the advertised product/ service is on a surface level, such as the decor/atmosphere/prices.
2. However, when it comes to the core aspects of the dining experience, such as the food quality and customer service, people are less likely to be affected by the use of language. Comments in open-ended questions of the survey, such as “Both will work about the same because they promote impulse buying.” indicate that not basing opinions of the intrinsic qualities of services on the language of the advertisement might be a consumer’s defense mechanism against business strategies.

4.3 Analyses based on Speech Communities

4.3.1. Based on Participants’ Country of Residence (Figure 2)

1. In “Article Preferences by Place of Residence”, more people in Taiwan prefer Article B (without FL) over Article A (with FL). Half of the participants in Europe like Article B, with the other half showing no opinions. All participants in Canada voted for Article B.
2. Except for participants in Canada, more people voted for the Select coffee shop. This is especially obvious for Europe, as all of its participants chose the Select Coffee Shop.
3. In “Sophistication of S2 compared to S1”, people in Taiwan think S2 (with FL) is more sophisticated than those without to a greater degree than those in Canada and Europe.

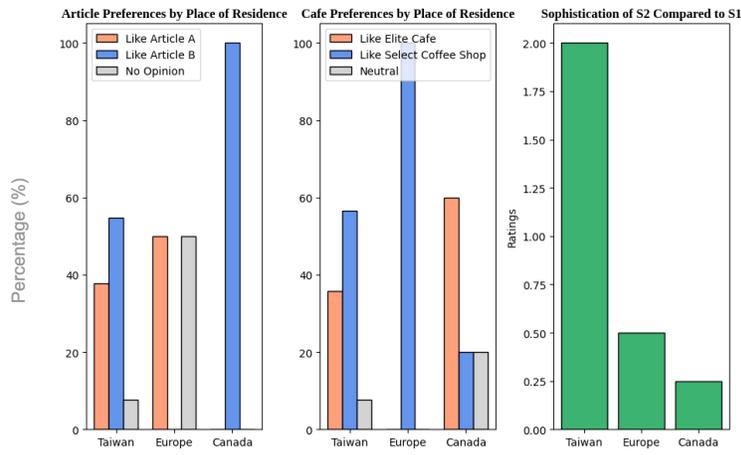


FIGURE 2: *Results based on Participants' Country of Residence*

Discussion:

1. With comments like “使用太多外來語，反而過於難閱讀” and “較少見的單字會讓文章較難閱讀” from Taiwanese (Uncommon words/Using too many loanwords make the article hard to read), we can reasonably infer that more Taiwanese, many of who are less advanced English speakers, chose Article B for readability.
2. People in Canada and Europe have higher exposure to these due to geographical proximity and French being the official language of Canada. Therefore, French might come across as normal to people in Canada and Europe, while it is rare and special to those in Taiwan. (A participant who resides in Canada commented "For me these two posters are the same with different language only.") It is prevalent that people assign greater value and focus more on scarce things, according to the Scarcity Principle (Cialdini, 2009). Moreover, in the eyes of people who usually have more exposure to French culture, the act of using French loanwords to emphasize the feeling of sophistication might come across as pretentious or unnecessarily showing off. A native speaker of French commented “It sounds a bit pretentious.” to S2 (with FL).
3. While participants in Canada do not seem to tolerate Article A (with FL) much, they seem to accept the Elite Cafe (also with FL) to an extent. This can be due to the bilingual nature of marketing in Canada. In some regions of Canada, up to 23.2% percent of all marketing is bilingual (Statistics Canada, 2022). Therefore, while general writing with FL

might come off as intentionally “showing off” or “pretentious”, bilingual advertisement seems natural, thus avoiding repulsion.

Overall, the results align with the second hypothesis of this study.

4.3.2 Based on Participants’ Level of English Proficiency

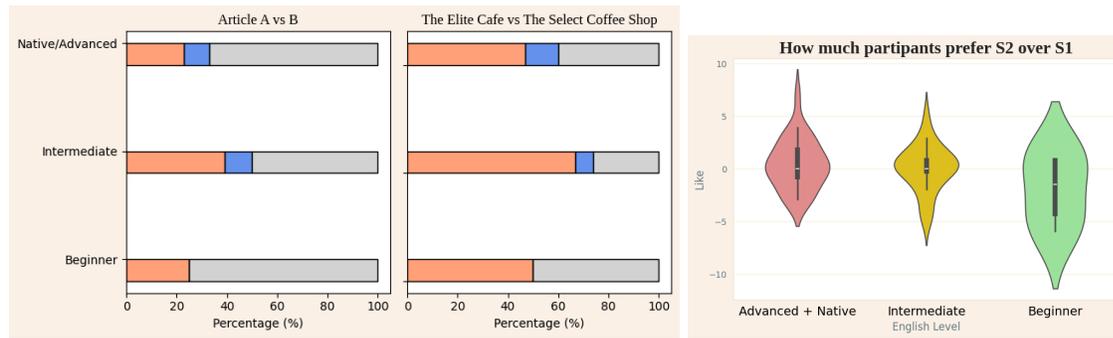


FIGURE 3: Results based on Participants’ English level

In Figure 3, with the one-line sentences, the preference for S2 (with FL) over S1 decreases along the participants’ English proficiency. For longer texts like articles and advertisements, how much participants like texts with FL goes: Intermediate > Native/Advanced > Beginner. Native and advanced-level speakers prefer FL in cafe advertisement settings over article contexts.

Discussion:

1. Generally, participants show more interest in text with FL as their English level increases. Lower-level speakers are likely discouraged because of the unfamiliar words (eTable 2). Furthermore, more exposure to English often also indicates a higher education level and more exposure to international affairs, making FL less intimidating for them.
2. In longer texts, there is a more repeated usage of French loanwords, which is sometimes repulsed by participants, according to the qualitative data collected. People complained that using FL was “just showing off” or even “pretentious”. 7 people have reported such feelings, with 4 being native speakers. Firstly, native speakers are likely more aware of the manipulative tactics that can be employed with loanwords due to their long-time exposure to English-speaking environments, hence showing aversion. Secondly, compared to lower-level speakers, they are less likely to be impressed by “high-level language use” due to their proficiency in English. This provides a reason why the data collected in longer texts contradict the conclusion of the previous point.

Overall, the results align with the second hypothesis of this study.

4.4 Analyses Based on Participants' Perception of France/French

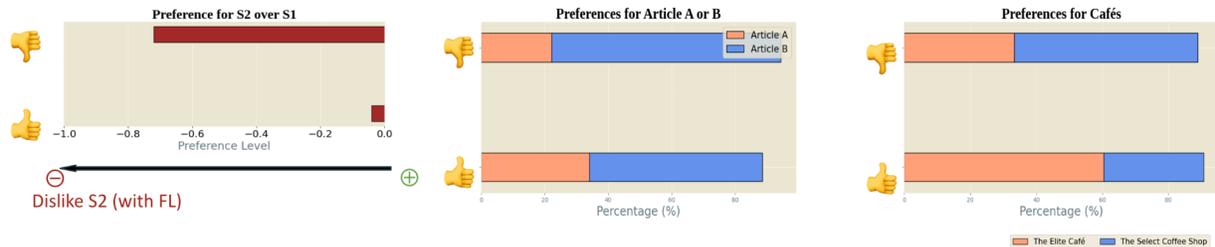


FIGURE 4: Results based on Participants' perceptions of France/French

In Figure 4, based on the data collected, participants with negative perceptions about France and the French language show significantly lower interest in text with FL (eMethod 1).

Discussion:

This aligns with the first hypothesis of this study, which proposes that one's perception of loanwords is influenced by their overall attitude toward the culture or country from which those elements originate.

5. CONCLUSION

As a response to the previous hypotheses, the following are the most important conclusions this study yielded:

1. One's perception of loanwords is related to one's perception of the loanwords' origin. By categorizing participants' qualitative answers regarding their perception of France and French based on their level of positivity, this study found that the former group of participants are less appealed by French loanwords. Additionally, as participants rated France and French as historical, text with FL is perceived as less modern. This aligns with the first hypothesis of this study.
2. One's level of exposure to English and French is related to one's perception of French loanwords in English. One more familiar with English and French, whether due to their location or their proficiency in these languages, is less likely to be appealed by FL because of their familiarity with the languages.

For future studies, one can expand the scope to various languages and sources of loanwords. Furthermore, more detailed methods to categorize speech communities will increase

the precision of analyses. For example, responses from different areas of Canada can be discussed separately as their exposure to French is different.

6. REFERENCES

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7. APPENDICES: For eFigures, eTables, eMethods & the Full Questionnaire:

<https://linktr.ee/LinguisticsPaperFL>. All figures and tables are created by the author.