

PHONETIC INVENTORY AND TABOO

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The practice of linguistic taboo, i.e. the avoidance of specific words because of associations with forbidden or sacred things, is well-documented. However, the implications of taboo have not received serious attention in historical studies, especially historical phonetics. While it is recognized that taboo may effect lexical replacement and shift, the role of taboo in explaining irregular sound correspondences (in single words or sets) is an equally important, though neglected, aspect of taboo [5]. These two effects correspond to the strategies open to a speaker when a word is taboo: (1) replace the word with an alternate (synonym, archaicism, borrowing), and (2) modify the pronunciation. There is yet another possible consequence of widescale taboo on the phonetic system of a language, namely an increase in the size and complexity of the sound system. Such an effect is limited to situations of extensive language contact where one language provides the resources for avoiding taboo words -- either a stock of alternate vocabulary or new phonetic units to be exploited in phonetic modification. Given sufficient time and institutionalization of such practice, these foreign sounds may be incorporated into the host sound system. This paper explores this role of taboo in the historical expansion of a phonetic inventory, using the dramatic example of click incorporation in Southern Bantu languages.

One of the most striking and well-known examples of phonetic contamination due to language contact involves the Bantu languages of southern Africa. This group of languages is typologically distinct from the Khoisan languages that surround it in the most major features with the exception of the regular exploitation of velaric ingressive consonants, i.e. click sounds, within their phonetic and phonological inventories. This feature is so pervasive in these groups and so rare elsewhere that these languages are sometimes known as "the click languages", although this time is sometimes reserved for Khoisan languages. Clicks have been reported in various languages outside Africa, but they do not

function within normal phonology and the number of oppositions never approaches that found in southern Africa.

It is well-established that clicks are not inherited elements in Bantu. They were borrowed from Khoisan, probably Khoikhoi (Hottentot). The Bantu languages most affected by this contact include the Nguni group and S. Sotho. The Nguni group is subdivided into a number of language units, including Zulu, Xhosa, Swazi, Ndebele. This paper provides a new explanation for the incorporation of such highly marked units as clicks into the phonetic inventories of S. Bantu, an explanation that goes beyond reference to language contact. Most documented cases of phonetic/phonological influence due to borrowing are confined to instances of filling inventory gaps, restructuring of constraints, etc. Apart from such instances, non-native phonetic elements are often subjected to loan phonology, i.e., elements from the native system substitute for them. What sets the S. Bantu case apart from others is the enormity and the peculiar nature of the contact effects [4]. For example, it is estimated that one-sixth of Xhosa words contain clicks. The vast majority of these words are of demonstrable or presumed Khoisan origin, but there are examples of clicks substituting for inherited Bantu consonants. Almost half of the 55 consonants of Xhosa are almost exclusively confined to the borrowed vocabulary [4]; these are the non-inherited consonants, indicated within parentheses in the chart below.

ɓ							
p	t	(t̥s̥)	(t̥y)	c	k	(k̥x̥)	(ʔ c ɓ)
b	d	(d̥z̥)	(d̥y)	j	g		(ʔg̥ ʔg̥ ɓg̥)
p ^h	t ^h	(t̥s̥ ^h)	(t̥y ^h)	c ^h	k ^h		(ʔ ^h c ^h ɓ ^h)
f	s	ʃ		s	(x)		h
v	z	ʒ			(ɣ)		ʃ
w		l	y				
m	n		ɲ	ŋ			(ʔɲ̥ ʔɲ̥ ɓɲ̥)
m ^h			(ɲ ^h)				(ʔɲ̥ ^h ʔɲ̥ ^h ɓɲ̥ ^h)

An initial question concerns the reasons for this widescale phonetic influence of one language upon another. The usual explanation has to do with the taking of Khoisan wives by Bantu-speaking males [2, 4]. According to this theory, S. Bantu males were polygamous, and the father was only an occasional visitor to his families. The dominant linguistic influence was therefore that of the mother. Such intermarriage had a high incidence and existed over a period of centuries. The details of this explanation, in particular the polygamy of Bantu males, are not universally accepted, but all agree that widescale and enduring contact must be reconstructed. Oral history among several Bantu groups relates the incorporation of Khoisan-speaking clans.

A number of features have enshrined the Khoisan-Bantu contact in the linguistic literature. First, the majority of borrowed sounds are clicks, which are incorporated at three places of articulation with a number of distinct qualities, e.g., Xhosa exhibits 15 distinct click sounds. The mere receptivity of a language to such unusual sound types requires explanation, especially in view of their high markedness value. Second, borrowed consonants appear in inherited Bantu lexical items. Cf. internal correspondences such as Zulu *kh:kh* as in *xhophha* 'to hurt the eye' vs. *ukhophe* 'eyelash'; *c:th* as in *-consa* 'fall, drip, leak' vs. *lithonsi* 'a drop of liquid'. Lexical reconstructions occasionally show the same bizarre correspondences, e.g. **-tima* > *-cima* 'to extinguish'. Commonly, both an inherited Bantu form and a modified form co-exist with differentiated meanings, e.g. *chela:thela* 'to sprinkle (ceremonially?):to pour, pour out'. Third, the phonological influence of Khoisan is confined to consonant borrowing. The nasalized vowels of Khoisan are not borrowed, and there is no influence on canonical Bantu phonotactics; vowel sequences and word-final consonants, both pervasive Khoisan traits, are absent in Bantu. Finally, there is no significant Khoisan influence on the very distinctive and highly resilient Bantu morphological and morphosyntactic systems. Thus, if one assumes some intense brand of bilingualism to explain the borrowing of such a large number of exotic consonants, one is hard pressed to explain the absence of other significant influence.

A contributing factor in the incorporation of Khoisan sounds into Bantu phonetic systems must have been the very distinct acoustic quality of clicks. Clicks are perceptually sharp and distinct as a class. The nature of the bilingualism present in the contact situation (whatever its details), the sharp quality of the clicks, and the absence of any inherited Bantu sounds with which they might be easily matched are all factors contributing

to their incorporation.

Little can be said with certainty about the linguistic prehistory of southern Africa, including the identity and nature of the Khoisan contact languages. Five click types are found within Khoisan: bilabial, dental, alveolar, palatal, and lateral. No Bantu language displays more than three, and only Xhosa and Zulu exhibit a three-way opposition: dental, (pre-) palatal, and lateral. In other Nguni languages, the inventory is reduced or eliminated. The only non-Nguni language to have acquired clicks is S. Sotho, which displays voiceless, aspirated, and nasal forms of the palatal click. It is generally assumed that S. Sotho acquired only this one type, and there is no good reason to argue otherwise; other demonstrable effects of Khoisan contact are slight when compared with Nguni, e.g. in borrowed vocabulary.

There is very good reason to believe, based on studies of "gene flow", that there is no relationship between Khoisan admixture (as a measure of population absorption) and linguistic borrowing. Studies of gene flow are relevant only if one assumes a prehistoric state of affairs in which San physical types spoke San languages. (Obviously, genes do not speak languages.) Bantu languages spoken by populations with little biological admixture exhibit clicks, and populations with extensive admixture speak click-less languages, e.g. Kgalagadi, Tswana. Thus, the absorption of Khoisan populations cannot in itself explain click incorporation. There must be more to the sociohistory of clicks than Beach's view that "clicking is to some extent contagious" [1].

The most plausible explanation for the peculiar results of this contact situation refers to *hlonipha* (also *hlonipa*, *hlonepha*), customs observed by married women with regard to their male relatives-in-law (and sometimes the mother-in-law), especially the father-in-law. In addition to rules having to do with dress, access to areas of the homestead, etc., *hlonipha* involves the avoidance of the names of a husband's father and other senior male members of the male line. The custom appears strongest and most extensive among the Zulu and Xhosa, where it is not only the individual's name that must be avoided but also any of its composite syllables (except for suffixal elements). For example, Finlayson [3] discusses the case of a Xhosa woman who must avoid, inter alia, the names *Dike*, *Ntlokwana*, *Nina*, and *Saki*: she must not utter the syllables *di*, *ke*, *ntlo*, *kwa*, *sa*, *ki*, *ni*, *na*. A number of distinct strategies are employed to this end:

(1) deformation by consonant substitution

Xhosa	<i>hlonipha</i>	
idikazi	ishikazi	'unmarried woman'
unina	utsitsa	'your mother'
sam	tyam	'my' (cl. 7)

(2) morphophonetic deformation by usana

intsana	'baby' (cl. 11>9)	
usapho	intsapho	'family'

In the above examples (2), the syllable is avoided by a morphophonological change due to noun class transfer.

(3) use of a semantically related word:

intsasa	'brushwood' >	iinkuni	'firewood'
iswekile	'sugar' >	intlathathi	'sand'

(4) neologism

ukusaba	'to flee' >	ukulimelela
ukusa	'to take to' >	ukunawukisa

(5) use of an archaic or borrowed word.

Phonetic substitutions are relevant to present concerns. This strategy is most common when the initial syllable of a stem requires avoidance. Only consonant substitution is involved; there are no cases where vowel substitution alone deforms a syllable sufficiently.

The suggestion is advanced here that the process of *hlonipha* is the essential part of any explanation for click incorporation. There is no way to understand the extensive (yet restricted) Khoisan influence without recourse to some peculiar linguistic feature of the sociohistorical context. Specifically, the claim here is that native (i.e. Khoisan) phonologies provided Khoikhoi and/or San women with a ready-made and "natural" source for consonant substitution required by *hlonipha*. That is, a woman, enjoying a prohibition against uttering particular syllables would look to her own phonetic inventory in order to find alternates. On the one hand, the substitution of a foreign element such as a click is perceptually salient and deforms the syllable acceptably. On the other hand, the use of non-Bantu consonants for this purpose precludes the possibility of homophony with existing words. The existence of an extraordinary phonetic inventory therefore served an important sociolinguistic function.

Several advantages derive from this explanation. First, the presence of clicks in inherited Bantu words is explained. The seemingly random substitution of a click for an inherited consonant represents the historical "fixing" of a *hlonipha* form. As mentioned above, co-existence of an inherited form and a *hlonipha* alternate with semantic differentiation is more common.

One striking fact not mentioned in the

literature is that there is a direct correlation between the existence of *hlonipha* in a language and the extensiveness of consonant incorporation. *hlonipha* is most pervasive in the same Nguni languages that exhibit the greatest number of click types, i.e. Xhosa and Zulu. It is surely not accidental that the languages in which syllable avoidance is most widely practiced are the same languages that have incorporated three click types and other Khoisan consonants. Apart from Nguni, *hlonipha* is practiced only by the S. Sotho, but it is less extensive both in terms of the range of individuals whose names must be avoided and the rules of practice. Note that a single click type occurs in S. Sotho. The languages most closely related to S. Sotho, viz. Tswana and N. Sotho, exhibit neither click incorporation nor *hlonipha*.

The proposed connection between *hlonipha* and consonant incorporation is further supported by the nonclick consonants that act as favored substitutes in *hlonipha*. Although no firm patterns appear [2,3], two of the most common Xhosa substitutes are *ty* [c'] and *dy* [j]; these consonants are not reflexes of Proto-Bantu consonants. The preferred status of these sounds in *hlonipha* is like the status of clicks, i.e., they became established as preferred substitutes precisely because they did not occur in native Bantu words. Also, in earlier times, these Khoisan consonants did not themselves require avoidance since they did not occur in Bantu personal names.

A fundamental problem in any attempt to gauge the climate and mechanisms of earlier *hlonipha* as practiced by Khoisan women is the lack of written records. The linguistic and cultural prehistory of southern Africa is an enormously complex web of migrations, conquests, assimilations, and diversifications. One can say more about the current status of *hlonipha*, and it is clear that its strength is waning through the area. The literature is full of anecdotal reports of situations in which individuals are forced to violate the taboo. "The custom, once broken, steadily loses its peculiar power over the person breaking it." [2] Urbanization and the consequent weakening of tribal traditions also contribute to the decline of *hlonipha*.

The conclusion here is that clicks (and other Khoisan consonants) may originally have been restricted to a supplementary vocabulary, i.e. a vocabulary recognized as being outside of "normal" language. However, over the course time, this special status disappeared or was blurred, and the consonants were absorbed into the native inventory, leading the way for lexical borrowings without the expected patterns of loan phonology. As it is impossible to assert anything about the contact situation with certainty, it may be

instructive to compare briefly this proposed analysis with other cases of linguistic taboo that have left lasting imprints.

Simons [5] provides a comprehensive survey of taboo in Austronesian languages. The details on what is taboo and the strategies of word avoidance vary from language to language, but there are certain similarities with the S. Bantu data. First, in many instances, it is not only the individual's name that is taboo but also common words from which that name is formed or words that "sound like" the taboo name. For example, all Owa words sharing the initial syllable with a taboo name must be avoided. This parallels the use of phonetic deformation in Bantu when the offending syllable is the first root syllable. Second, there are cases in which specific avoidance forms become conventional. Such cases demonstrate that inherited words can be replaced over time by avoidance forms even when the replaced word is not universally taboo in the community. In one instance, that of Muyuw, 19% of the basic lexicon was replaced over a span of 50 years. Third, the effects of naming taboos may be widespread indeed; by some estimates, nearly two-thirds of the basic vocabulary may be potentially taboo (for various individuals) in a community. It must be noted that although the Austronesian examples testify to the potentially considerable influence of word taboo, they are unlike the S. Bantu case in that contact languages had broadly similar sound inventories, and one does not observe the restructuring seen in Bantu. The necessary conditions for the S. Bantu type of contact influence seem to include: (1) intense language contact or bilingualism, (2) radically different phonetic systems in the contact languages, (3) the long-term practice of taboo. Situations in which two of these three conditions obtain are not uncommon, and they may result in significant externally-induced change, including an enrichment of the phonetic inventory. However, it is claimed that the three conditions must be jointly invoked to explain the very peculiar nature of the S. Bantu case, i.e. the incorporation of very heavily marked phonetic items and relatively little influence elsewhere in linguistic structure.

Not all Khoisan words in Bantu are hlonipha forms. The claim is rather that the practice of hlonipha "primed" the languages to be receptive to click incorporation, especially if, as has been traditionally maintained, children's main linguistic influence was that of hlonipha-practicing mothers. The sociolinguistic history of southern Africa is considerably more complex than traditional accounts (oral history and early ethnography) present, but the extensive practice of linguistic taboo has been underappreciated

in explaining the outcome of language contact. The reconstruction of socio-linguistic prehistory in the area poses a continuing challenge to linguists and anthropologists alike.

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