

Phonological cover-up: contact-induced undoing of sound changes in Sri Lanka Malay

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This paper discusses renewed contact to the donor language undoing language internal phonological changes to loanwords borrowed earlier from the same language. This is exemplified with a contact scenario involving Malay and South Asian languages (Tamil and various Indo-Aryan languages).

The Malay language in South East Asia has many ancient borrowings from Indian languages (Prakrits, Tamil). These loanwords are more than 1000 years old and have undergone phonological integration (loss of retroflexes, loss of gemination, loss of aspirates, etc). We can cite *topi* ‘hat’ from Tamil *toppi* (loses geminate) or *singa* ‘lion’ from an Indo-Aryan donor language (cf. Hindi *siṃh* ‘lion’, loses /h/).

From the 17th to the 19th century, the colonial powers of the Dutch and the British brought Malay-speaking mercenaries from South East Asia to Sri Lanka (Hussainmiya 1990). This led to renewed contact between Malay and South Asian languages, in this case Sinhala (Indic) and Tamil (Dravidian, Smith et al. 2004; Nordhoff 2009) As a result of this renewed contact, the former phonological changes were undone (Saldin 2007; Nordhoff 2012) in a hitherto undescribed process, which I call “phonological cover-up”: the word for ‘hat’ was once again *toppi*. Cover-up is defined as “an integrated loanword becoming unintegrated through renewed contact with the donor language.”

Research on language contact typically looks at only one, possibly quite long, contact scenario, where we can observe well-described phenomena like borrowing etc. In this talk, I will look at not one, but two, temporally separated contact scenarios between different chronolects of the same varieties (Tamil, Malay). These periods of contact were interrupted by a period of several centuries of low contact intensity. In the primary contact scenario, we can establish a borrowing from a donor language Tamil into the recipient language Malay. During the intermittent low-contact phase, this borrowing gets phonologically integrated (*toppi*→*topi*), for which there is ample evidence in Malay varieties (Paauw 2008). In the second contact scenario several centuries later, this phonological integration is undone: *topi*→again *toppi*. To the naked eye, it appears that the initial change (degemination in this case) never happened. Crucially for this workshop, we find this renewed gemination only for lexemes which have cognates in the adstrates Sinhala and/or Tamil, leading to “contact-induced reversal”. So *topi*→*toppi*, to align with Tamil *toppi* and Sinhala *toppiya*, but original *sopi* ‘liquor’ does not regeminate because Sinhala and Tamil lack cognates here. The same is true for *kappal* ‘ship’ →*kapal*→*kappal*, under renewed influence from Tamil. Next to gemination, the process of cover-up will be illustrated for four other phonological domains: vowel length, dental vs. alveolar articulation of the voiced stop, syllabification of the velar nasal, syllabification of NC clusters.

The paper closes with a theoretical discussion of the methodological problems of distinguishing plain retention under contact from reversal under contact as seen in cover-up.

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