A postmodern look at the use of English borrowings to create youth identity

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses the use of English borrowings in the native oral discourse of Portuguese university students and how they use English to affirm their identity. Traditional ways of viewing language and identity are associated with nation based definitions, but today, those definitions work as straightjackets and English has become a means through which people add to their linguistic repertoire to use on a local level. This paper takes a bottom-up view of linguistic change by analysing how youth today uses English and its contribution to the creation of an individual, group or global youth identity.

2. BACKGROUND

English has, over the past few decades, become the lingua franca of the globalised world with a view to facilitating communication and increasing and improving international and intercultural relations. With an increasing number of people worldwide using it as a language of communication, not only has the face of English been altered as the result of this contact with non-native speakers and their mother tongues but also the mother tongues themselves due to the contact they have with English. Young people in particular, seem to be increasingly aware of the role of English as a lingua franca, using its borrowings and integrating them when communicating in their native languages. So, rather than the traditional top-down process which results in linguistic change, the theory underpinning this paper is that linguistic change can also be a bottom-up process with individuals and communities affecting language change on a local/global level.

With six to seven thousand languages currently spoken in the world and with languages disappearing at an alarming rate, there is growing concern about the cultural heritage of indigenous languages which is being lost as English becomes the lingua franca of the globalised world. Arguments have been put forward both for and against English as the global language of communication, and Pennycook states that there are ‘complex
interactions between global and local forces, English and popular culture’ (Pennycook 2003: 3). Whether the spread of English is seen as something beneficial or prejudicial, the fact remains that English is now spoken by more people than ever as they choose to learn the language traditionally perceived to be of the rich and powerful. Whichever perspective is preferred, it is not possible to stop either the spread of English or the Englishisation of the languages with which it comes into contact.

With an ever increasing number of non-native speakers of English learning English to communicate with other non-native as well as native speakers, it is possible to agree with the argument that Kachru puts forward, which favours the use of the term “Englishes” over “English” (Kachru 1995). With Kachru’s expanding circle increasing in size, there are serious implications for both the face English as the result of its contact with non-native speakers, as well as for the native languages with which English comes into contact. Languages have always come into contact and mutually influenced each other and with English playing such an important contemporary global role, non-native as well as native speakers of English use it to communicate with others. It may be possible to say that in some contexts, English has been stripped of its cultural baggage and is a ‘cultureless’ language which can be appropriated by the global community on a local level and used to serve the purpose of its users. Jenkins affirms that foreign languages have the ability to express aspects of a speaker’s social identity with English becoming ‘increasingly central to its International use’ (Jenkins 2003: 143). Risager adds that it is no longer correct to use the word ‘spread’ of the English language but refers to the new worldwide status of English as a lingua franca as a result of ‘language flow’ where language practice and identity construction are fluid and less static than traditionally thought (Risager 2006: 90). O’Driscoll affirms that English can be used as an ‘alternative code,’ another linguistic choice the individual has amongst their repertoire of language (O’Driscoll 2002: 266). The traditional ways of viewing culture, language and identity are associated with nation based definitions, where it is easy to identify one country, one language and one culture. However, in today’s globalised world, traditional definitions of culture and identity work as straightjackets with our multiple identities today. Therefore, it would seem that the changes in language use across the globe will result in more code-switching or code-mixing and a wider linguistic repertoire resulting in plurilingual practices. Franceschini suggests that code-switching is a means through which people can express their multiple identities
indicating that English will add to the range of linguistic choice rather than detract from it.

This is particularly true for today’s youth, which is constantly exposed to English through the media and technology and which seems to appropriate English into its linguistic repertoire. Youth is more than just a phenomenon constructed by the media of the time to be studied as a part of our societies. It is clear that youth uses a variety of styles to express itself in a number of ways, language being one of the media through which identity is constructed and displayed. Chambers states that young people are exposed to a wide range of linguistic variants and that ‘conformity to peer group norms and distinction from adult norms leads to the adoption of regional linguistic variables beyond the neighborhood and sometimes a preference for variants not favored by adults’ (Chambers 1997: 172). Poveda is also of the opinion that language plays an important role in youth culture, with the development of new words being an integral part of construction of identity (Poveda 2006: 42), coining the term ‘lexical innovation’ to refer to the process of inventing new words or transforming meaning from one context to another, these terms being successively substituted by following generations of adolescents. In the findings of her COLT study, Stenström states that the results clearly indicate that adolescents are able to accommodate the language they use depending on the context (Stenström, Andersen et al. 2002: 212). Kim has added to this idea by suggesting that Korean youth are very much geared towards globalisation and that the construction of their identity is related to the global society where English is the language of communication where ‘they are socialized into their national culture as Koreans while becoming socialized into the global society and culture through learning English’ (Kim 2006: 595 - 596). In other words, youth in Korea feel that they not only develop a national identity but also an international one, which for them is also an important aspect of the construction of their individual identity.

Consequently, the use of English borrowings by youth today should not be seen as peripheral behaviour which has a detrimental effect on language but shows youth’s ability to demarcate itself in complex ways from society as a whole and increase its range of linguistic choice. Youth has a linguistic repertoire which should not be undermined or undervalued and has the power to affect language. As a result of how youth uses language are vital in order to understand how language choice is determined
and the way in which young people rely on their linguistic repertoire to be heard and build their identity in society.

3. MAIN STUDY
The main objective of this study was to determine which English borrowings were used in the Portuguese oral discourse of particular groups of university students. The aim was to collate a list of English borrowings which were used by Portuguese youth culture and highlight the similarities and differences in their use among students from different universities and areas and years of study. Following on from that, the intention was to ascertain whether the English language was a medium through which youth expressed itself and their attitudes towards that use.

A further objective of the project was to take a closer look at the English words used by a specific group of students to find out the most influential sources of those words as well as the reasons for their use in order to ascertain whether their use was linked to the construction of a youth identity. Finally, the use of English borrowings in Portuguese discourse by this group of university students and graduates from the same area of study was compared to see whether there was any continuity in their use or if they fell into disuse. These objectives were answered using the following research questions:

• Which English borrowings are primarily used by students studying English (as a major or minor subject) and attending a variety of degree courses at the universities of Aveiro, Évora and Oporto?
• Do students use English borrowings as a means of constructing a common social youth identity?
• Are there similarities between English borrowings used by university students and graduates of the same area of study once the latter have moved into the workplace?

The answers to these questions were obtained using the methodological approach laid down in the following section.

4. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH
The approach adopted in this study was a synchronic one, rather than a more historical or diachronic approach, in order to take a closer look at the language used by a
particular group of university undergraduates and graduates at a specific point in time. It was important to analyse the use of language in social contexts to ascertain whether there were patterns which were separate from areas such as grammar and social structure and if there were other frames of reference, such as age, which could have caused specific speech patterning, and if so why that patterning occurred. It was also important to take a step back from the language and look more closely at communication itself and to what extent it is possible that communities within communities have their own speech patterns and codes which bind them together as a group.

4.1 Collation of lexical bank

This project involved three main stages. The first stage involved data collection across a two week period from the various undergraduate communities studying at the universities of Aveiro, Évora and Oporto, with students from all years of study. Students and graduates were asked to keep a record of all the English borrowings they used over the course of two weeks, as well as when and where they used them and with whom. The information required to complete the chart was deliberately chosen to collate a wide range of extra information other than the borrowings used. The chart also included information to create a student profile of the participants. This information was important to ascertain whether there were differences between the English terms used from year to year or from degree course to degree course. In terms of the information required to complete the table itself, four columns needed to be filled in for each term/expression used: the term/expression itself, who said it, to whom and in which context. In order to facilitate the collation of data, a corpus of student language was produced and the Simple Concordance Programme Version 4.0.8 was used to identify which lexical items were most used by university students. The objective in this case was to identify the words and expressions used by university students and create a word bank of those which were most frequently used. Once the collation of the word bank was complete, a focus questionnaire was given to participants from the most representative group for completion.
4.2 Focus questionnaire
The second stage involved the completion of focus questionnaires, which gave an insight into the use of English borrowings in Portuguese discourse and the students’ attitudes towards the use of those words. This second phase in the study entailed the completion of a focus questionnaire which rendered more specific information about the use of English borrowings and the sources of and motivation behind their use. The questionnaire was completed by students taking a degree in Languages & Business Management (LBM) as they were the most representative students the first phase of the study. Students from all years of study completed the questionnaire in class time under controlled conditions. The objective was to obtain data from the greatest number of students possible without consulting colleagues.

4.3 Comparison of undergraduate and graduate borrowings
The third and final stage involved the comparison of the results obtained from the collation of the lexical bank of the LBM group in the first phase of this study to graduates from the same area of study. This section attempted to answer the third main research question, which focused on the continuity or not of the use of English borrowings as undergraduates finish higher education and move into the workplace. As with the first stage, the graduates were contacted via e-mail, yet making contact with these graduates was an arduous task and the information pertaining to the use of English borrowings in the Portuguese discourse of graduates was dependent on their willingness to collaborate. Many students had changed their e-mail addresses or moved workplace and not kept in touch with ex-university colleagues. Their work schedules were also a factor which weighed heavily on their commitment to the project, which significantly affected the number of respondents. Despite these constraints, a comparison of the words used by both groups was carried out to see whether there was any continuity in the words used by undergraduates as they moved into the workplace.

5 RESULTS
There were two main study communities in this study, the first being university students and the second graduates of the LBM degree at the University of Aveiro. The first group comprised university students taking degrees in areas of which English, to a greater or lesser degree, was a component. To obtain a clearer picture of the use of
English vocabulary in the Portuguese discourse of these university students this major group was subdivided, firstly into students who were studying at different universities across the country. Secondly, they were then divided into different degree courses and finally into different years of study, from first to fourth year inclusive. This way, data from a wide selection of students was obtained to build a representative representation of the students participating in this project.

5.1 Collation of lexical bank

A total of 213 tables were completed from students from a number of different degree courses and at the three universities in this study, the breakdown of which can be seen in Table 1 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>N° Tables Completed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aveiro University</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Évora University</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Porto University</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erasmus Students</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Undergraduate Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>205</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LBM Graduates</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Respondents</strong></td>
<td><strong>213</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Breakdown of Table/Questionnaire Respondents

The next step after ascertaining how many responses were obtained and from which degree courses, was to analyse the list of the English words and expressions put forward by students and use the SCP to draw up a list of the top words used and how many mentions there were of each term. A total of 2,505 mentions were put forward by undergraduate students and 42 by graduate students. Table 2 shows the top five words collated from all the different groups under study here and show the persistence of the use of the same terms throughout universities, degree courses and graduate students. It clearly shows that the word OK was present in the top five list of every group under
study. The word *Cool* was present in all lists except the graduate group, the words *Hi/Hello* were mentioned three times, and *Yes* (in all its variations) twice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nº</th>
<th>Aveiro</th>
<th>Évora</th>
<th>Porto</th>
<th>Erasmus</th>
<th>LBM</th>
<th>LBM Graduates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>Hello</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Hi / Hello / Yo</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>e-learning</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>E-mail / Mail</td>
<td>OK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Cool</td>
<td>Cool</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Weekend</td>
<td>Cool</td>
<td>Bye</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Yeah / Ya(h) / Yes / Ye/up</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Stop</td>
<td>Fuck</td>
<td>Hi / Hello</td>
<td>Love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Night</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>Whatever</td>
<td>Cool</td>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Top 5 words across all groups

What is interesting to see is that all seventeen of these words, making up 57% of the total number of words are either not really content words as such but more fillers, greetings or function words. These results were quite unexpected for two reasons. Firstly, the majority of words used seem to content free, whose purpose seem to be to pad out the rest of the discourse, rather than words which carried semantic meaning. Secondly, the words do not seem to be youth specific in that they are words which mainstream Portuguese society uses as well. Of the remaining 43% of the top five words across all groups over 54% are content words and not the greetings or fillers found in the top five lists.

From the 2,505 words and expressions given by all undergraduate students, a total of 845 different words and expressions were isolated and divided into categories. The results clearly indicate that despite the top five words for the different groups of students being mainly greetings or discourse fillers, they only made up 19% of the total word count. 509 words or expressions were nouns making up 60% of the overall number, including many ICT terms but also from a wide range of areas, indicating that
English is used in a wide range of situations to render language in a multiplicity of settings.

The overall results of this division can be seen in Table 3 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nouns</th>
<th>Greetings &amp; Fillers</th>
<th>Verbs</th>
<th>Adjectives</th>
<th>Expletives</th>
<th>?</th>
<th>Extra</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>509</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>845</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Categorisation of Words used by Undergraduate Students

5.2 Focus questionnaire

As regards the focus questionnaire completed by the LBM undergraduates, Figure 1 shows the frequency with which LBM students feel they use English terms in their everyday discourse. Despite the fact that the frequent use of English terms remains high throughout all four years, what is interesting to note is that from 1st to 4th year, there is an overall increase in the number of students who claim to use English terms very often. The fact that the scores for never using English terms is zero across the board and the reduced number of students using English rarely clearly indicates that English borrowings are a significant part of the discourse of these students.

Figure 1: How often Students use English Terms
Figure 2 shows who English terms are used with. In relation to the main categories of people with whom English terms are used, it is clear that the biggest group with which these terms are used is ‘friends.’ This indicates that these terms are very much in-group lexical items. The second highest score is with ‘teachers,’ which could suggest one of two things. This could be the result of the assumption on the part of the students that their teachers know the meanings of those words or the fact that these students are essentially language students, most of whom have English as a major subject throughout their degree, and therefore using it with teachers is perceived as natural.

![Figure 2: Who students use English with](image)

Figure 3 shows the students’ general opinion in relation to the use of English borrowings in Portuguese discourse generally. In all of the opinions, the consensus appears to be the fact that English is something positive in terms of how the students use it because it is obviously something they like to do.
Students were then given the opportunity to rank from 1 to 7 what they thought most influenced the use of English terms in their Portuguese discourse, where 1 was the most influential and 7 the least. They were also given the chance to add other sources which they felt were important but were not included in the list. The results were divided into three groups, the first including ratings one to three, which were grouped together as having a strong influence on the students’ use of English terms. The second group included ratings five to seven, and indicated a weak influence on English use. Finally, the last group was the source the students rated four on the scale, which indicated neither a strong nor a weak influence on the use of English borrowings. Table 4 summarises the possible influential sources of English borrowings.

The response to the issue of whether the use of English terms in students’ Portuguese discourse is conscious or not is shown in Figure 4. The students’ answers consistently show that there are more students who are aware of their use of English words in their discourse than those who are not. They also indicate that the consciousness of the use English borrowings increases as students move through their degree course.
### Table 4: Most influential sources of English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Strong Influences</th>
<th>Neither Weak Nor Strong</th>
<th>Weak Influences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cinema</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The press</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Internet</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5 shows the reasons why students use English borrowings and confirms that their use is perceived to be something more global, with the use of English as a lingua franca and the fact that Portuguese society is more open to new cultures being the most important reasons for the use of English. This is followed by the fact that the students study English and that their friends use English vocabulary. Finally, the least important reasons are that English use may irritate older people or that some people may not understand them and that it makes students feel part of youth culture, in that order. It would seem, from these results, that what was important in the minds of the students was a feeling of internationality, of belonging to and communicating with the world in
general and that globalisation and modernisation are seen as positive concepts and international communication through the medium of English is essential.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Most Important Reasons</th>
<th>Unimportant Reasons</th>
<th>Least Important Reasons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>74.5%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key:
A: Portuguese Society is open to new cultures
B: It makes me feel an important part of youth culture
C: English is the lingua franca of the globalised world
D: My friends use them too
E: People of different ages don’t understand them
F: I study English
G: It irritates people of different ages

Table 5: Reasons for using English borrowings

Students were then asked why they preferred to use English over their Portuguese equivalents. Students consistently stated that the use of English terms was due to there being no Portuguese equivalents, or that there was no easy translation of the English term. Obviously, there are equivalent ways of expressing concepts in Portuguese but the students feel that the English ones are more widespread and more easily understood than the Portuguese equivalents. Figure 5 shows the reasons for the students’ preferences for English over their first language.
Figure 5: Reasons for students’ preferences for English over Portuguese

Figure 6 shows the results of the students’ feelings towards English and shows that generally, there are very few students who have a negative attitude towards the use of English and that the students’ feelings of positivity increase as they progress in their degree programmes.

Figure 6: Students’ attitudes towards English

The final section of the questionnaire gave students the opportunity to make comments about the issue of the use of English borrowings. From the large number of comments,
the following make up an interesting group of comments which show the importance of the use of English in students’ native discourse:

*Students’ comments on the use of English:*

- It makes me feel at ease, gives me confidence when speaking English and I feel better adjusted to the world today.
- It makes me feel integrated both in society and in the knowledge of other countries and cultures. To me it is a sign of personal and cultural progress and development.
- As a language student, it helps me to feel like a real polyglot.
- English is slowly but surely taking over our vocabulary, which does not enrich [the] Portuguese [language] but enriches the Portuguese ‘polyglot spirit.’
- it is important to make languages alive and mobile in order to innovate and facilitate understanding among different cultures.

*Students’ comments on identity*

- It’s part of my identity.
- At least in youth culture, using English is simply natural.
- It keeps me informed and up-to-date and makes me feel part of a group.
- English words are used, most of the time, in urban contexts by youth, which is quite sensitive to media phenomena such as the cinema and music.
- We have different identities [and] to mix the two seems wrong to me, but there are feelings which are better expressed in one language than in another.

These results show that there is a degree of awareness of the extensive use of English borrowings in the Portuguese discourse of young people, in some cases a greater awareness of English use by others than by themselves. Despite many students saying that they use English terms unconsciously or out of habit, the responses to some of the questions clearly show that young people have a wide range of vocabulary at their disposal and there is linguistic choice depending on the situation and the register appropriate to each setting.

6. CONCLUSIONS
The findings refer to a specific social group and will therefore have a limited geographical and historical relevance. That said, language constitutes social identity and social identities should be seen as resources with which people express themselves. The distinctive speech patterns of young people allow new words to be coined from English and inserted into their native discourse regularly. There is also innovative use of already established words to distinguish youth from other groups and peers. Up to recently, social identities were defined in terms of social or political issues, but now other features, including age can be criteria which help define identity. The subordinate classes have always negotiated space for the co-existence of their own values within the dominant community and identity and group membership enables youth to experience, in this case through language, an alternative form of social reality.

This paper shows that English is not only widespread and the language of power, economics and the financially able, but belongs to the people too. Young people nowadays feel that English is the language of youth – they use English words and expressions to express themselves in way which they feel Portuguese cannot. English has for some time now been perceived to be the language through which countries communicate, treaties are forged and international relations take place. It is present in the echelons of power and is the means through which major political decisions which affect the whole planet are made. However, English takes on a whole new dimension when it is used by youth. English is the language of communication in the world, but youth seems to systematically refuse to openly contemplate the idea that it might be something young individuals share. It would seem that there is extensive English usage but the findings reveal that youth does not feel empowered by it. Youth does have the power to coin new terms and expand meaning but it does not seem to be aware of that fact.

The youth culture of today has an advantage when compared to previous generations in that it has access to a wealth of information which has allowed individuals to gain an insight into the complexities of the world in which they live, and not just their immediate surroundings. They have had the opportunity to see if not experience how young people live in different parts of the world, which has strengthened their knowledge of the need to communicate with people outside their own borders. English, for the youth of today, is the means through which they can gain access to the world
outside’ and become part of the global village that this planet has become. They are living the consequences of the technical revolution which has changed the way we see ourselves and others and are open to difference and change in a way that previous generations were not. Therefore, it is of vital importance that studies into the language of youth and the repercussions of that use are developed. This project is, to use a cliché, only the tip of the iceberg to understanding how and why youth today all over the world use English.

7. BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES


Kachru, B. (1995) "The Intercultural Nature of Modern English " Volume, DOI:


