

Loanword adaptation strategies in Gilbertese

Fedor Alekseev

Higher School of Economics,
St. Petersburg, Russia; e-mail: fgalekseev@edu.hse.ru

Abstract

This paper investigates the phonological and morphological mechanisms used in loanword adaptation in Gilbertese, an Austronesian language spoken in the Republic of Kiribati. I considered loanwords officially accepted by the conventional literary form of Gilbertese, as well as recent borrowings used in slang and Internet shorthand. Analyzing the most productive patterns of phonological and morphological adaptation of loanwords, I came to a conclusion that only borrowings of the colonial period have been fully integrated into Gilbertese phonology, syntax and morphology. More recent borrowings exhibit less involvement in complex syntactical structures and are usually used without any affixes. Interestingly, this is unusual for the region, as most of the local languages quickly integrate newest borrowings, developing an adapted transcription for them and using them in the same way as “native” lexemes.

Key words: Gilbertese, Kiribati, Micronesian languages, Austronesian languages, language contact, loanword adaptation, Oceanic languages

1. Introduction

Gilbertese (native names *te taetae ni Kiribati*, *te taetae n aomata* “natives’ language”), occasionally also called Kiribati and even Kiribatese, is a Micronesian language natively spoken in the Republic of Kiribati and some parts of Tuvalu, as well as by relatively large migrant communities in Fiji and Solomon Islands. Gilbertese is not a “typical” Micronesian language, as it has experienced a long-term Polynesian influence¹, which has strongly affected its phonology, lexicon, morphology and syntax. In comparison to other languages of the Micronesian family, Gilbertese has a smaller phonemic inventory² and tends to be a lot more analytical. Gilbertese is a pro-drop language with preverbal subject agreement morphemes and object agreement suffixes. The default word order is VOS. Not considering lexemes of Polynesian origin, English was (and continues to be) practically the only source of loanwords for Gilbertese, although several words of other origin can be found in Trussel’s dictionary³ (Trussel et al. 1978).

¹ Especially from neighboring Tuvaluan.

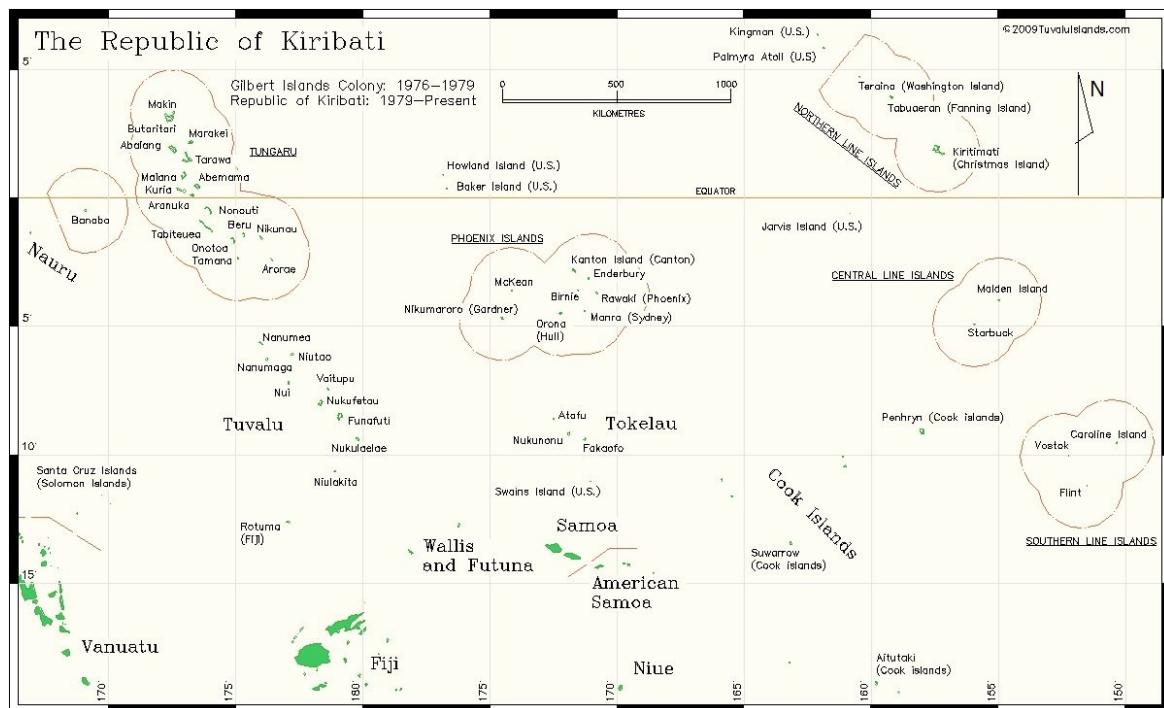
² cf. 20 phonemes in Gilbertese (Blevins et al. 1999) and 31 in Marshallese (Choi 1992) and Nauruan (Nathan 1974).

³ This will be further explained in chapter 4.



Pic. 1 General map of Kiribati

(source: <http://www.worldatlas.com/webimage/country/oceania/ki.htm> – accessed February 2015)



Pic. 2 Detailed map of Kiribati and neighbor territories (map source: http://brcstamps.com/catalog/countries/Kiribati/Kiribati_Map_1.html – accessed February 2015)

2. Phonological adaptation and spelling issues

2.1. Loanword categories

All loanwords I am going to consider in this paper can be grouped into two major categories:

- a) words of foreign origin officially accepted by the conventional literary form of Gilbertese, such as *ka* “car”, *koowana* “governor”;

more recent borrowings which do not have a uniform spelling and are almost exclusively used in informal context, such as *weekend*, *add*.⁴

The second category can be further subdivided into two other groups:

- b.1) concepts related to Western reality absent in pre-colonial lexicon which have no uniform literary spelling;
- b.2) words of foreign origin which have “native” counterparts.

2.2 Spelling issues in contemporary Gilbertese

Words belonging to all of these categories are usually adapted to Gilbertese phonology in spoken language, but only those accepted by the literary standard have a conventional adapted way of spelling which often deviates radically from English originals. However, many differences can be found in informal written language, where spelling and overall degree of adaptation fully depends on writer’s education and foreign language proficiency. Examples concerning loanword usage in informal Gilbertese I have analyzed in this paper are mostly taken from I-Kiribati posts and comments on Facebook⁵ thus representing a wide variety of informants who have different educational experience and different attitudes towards foreign languages, spelling issues and the present state of Gilbertese. Here is an example of a relatively simple sentence⁶ written by four different speakers of Gilbertese⁷:

- (1a) E raba te add. (EB)
- (1b) E rapa te add. (RO)
- (1c) Eraba te add. (SB)
- (1d) Erabwa te add. (NM)

e raba te add
3SG appreciated ART add
“Thanks for adding [me].”

The striking differences in the spelling of the predicate in this sentence can be explained by the unclear situation of normative orthography in Gilbertese. Many writing systems have been

⁴ ‘Add friend’ on Facebook and other social networking websites.

⁵ Many of them from a closed group named *Kamatoa ara taetae ni Kiribati* ‘[Let’s] improve our [knowledge of] Gilbertese’ (<http://www.facebook.com/groups/1531041167118997> – accessed February 2015).

⁶ This is a common Gilbertese expression of gratitude for adding a friend or giving access to a private group page on social networking websites.

⁷ Two-letter abbreviations stand for informants’ names, all of which are listed in chapter 6.

developed for Gilbertese by missionaries, researchers, teachers and government officials. The ways of spelling often differ a lot. Here is an example of the same word written by two missionaries taken in their dictionaries:

(2a) b'áib'ainænti (Bingham 1908)
 (2b) baibainanti (Sabatier 1954)
 “deformed”

Given the fact that literally tens of orthographies have been used for Gilbertese by different authors since the beginning of the 19th century, it is obvious that its speakers are often unsure which system they should use in everyday writing, especially that on the Internet.

2.3 Phonological adaptation of loanwords

While all loanwords from Tuvaluan and other neighboring Oceanic languages have been fully adapted to conform to Gilbertese phonology, English continues to be the only language from which new borrowings are still being introduced into the language. Conventionalized loanwords accepted by the literary language are usually adapted to Gilbertese phonology and phonotactics. Newer borrowings, especially those mostly used in informal context are usually integrated to a lesser extent and may be pronounced differently by different speakers, largely depending on their educational experience and competence in English and other foreign languages. Considering fully adapted English borrowings, we can state that no segments are restricted to loanwords. This is, however, not true about newest borrowings which mostly belong to the category b.2 (see chapter 2.1), as they are often pronounced as an imitation of original English pronunciation. Unlike English, Gilbertese does not allow consonant clusters in any position (the only exception is when one of two contiguous consonants is nasal). A syllable can only end in a vowel or, again, in a nasal consonant. Gilbertese syllable structure can thus be represented as (N)(C)V(V)(N), which is obviously simpler than the English one. Moreover, as I already stated in the introduction, Gilbertese phonemic inventory is strikingly small compared to that of closest relatives and that of English. These are the main factors that cause the phonological changes in the process of loanword adaptation.

(3) Ao tekeraoi am wikend! (TJ)
ao tekeraoi am wikend
 CONJ successful 2SG.POSS weekend
 “[I wish] you a great weekend!”

This example illustrates the partial adaptation which happens to newest loanwords in informal context. Here *weekend*, a Western concept previously absent in Gilbertese, thus belonging to the category b.1, is written as *wikend*, losing the original long vowel and partly adapting to standard orthography. Full adaptation according to conventional rules would be *wikenti* or *wikente*, as [d] is absent in Gilbertese and a syllable cannot end in a non-nasal consonant.

3. Morphological adaptation and borrowed constructions

3.1 Irregularity in loanword morphology

Loanwords which have been introduced in a language obviously have to be adapted not only phonologically, but also to fit language's morphology and syntax. The extent to which a borrowing is adapted in Gilbertese, again, depends on its conventionality and the time that has

passed since it was first introduced. Older borrowings, which are present in the language for many decades, sometimes show a striking degree of adaptation. For instance, *ka* 'car' has an irregular plural form *kaa* [ka:]. This pattern, i.e. lengthening of the first vowel to form plural, is relatively rare even in native lexicon (Trussel 1979). This is, however, a unique case. Most loanwords from European languages seldom take native affixes and almost never follow irregular patterns found in older layers of native lexicon.

3.2 Borrowed constructions and expressions

In recent years some complex constructions have been borrowed from English into Gilbertese together with usual loanwords. Here is another version of the expression presented in examples (1ad) with its structure slightly changed. The most striking feature which can be observed in this sentence is the intrusion of English preposition *for* taking place of the native determiner *n*. Example (5) shows the original structure of a similar sentence which is being gradually replaced by the English-influenced form shown in the example (4).

(4) Korabwa naba for te add. (MT)

ko raba naba for te add

2SG appreciated also for ART add

"By the way, thanks for adding [me]." (lit.: "You are also appreciated for adding.")

(5) Ko rab'a n am taeka. (Trussel 1979)

ko raba n am taeka

2SG appreciated D 2SG.POSS talk

"Thanks for your talk."

4. Source languages other than English

4.1 Once more on Polynesian influence in Gilbertese

Contrary to popular belief, Tuvaluan is not the only Polynesian language to have influenced Gilbertese lexicon. Sheldon P. Harrison states that several Polynesian loanwords of non-Samoic (East Polynesian) origin can be found in Gilbertese, presence of which is surprising as East Polynesia is separated from Gilbert Islands by thousands of kilometers (Harrison 1994). These are, for example, *momi* "pearl" (from Hawaiian) and *kaibuke* "ship" (from Maori). These words are likely to have been borrowed in the post-contact period, when people from different subregions of Oceania were transported to faraway archipelagos to help missionaries. Another non-Tuvaluan and non-Samoic lexeme found in contemporary Gilbertese is *kiko* "female genitalia" which seems to have Tongic origin. It might have been introduced in pre-colonial times by Tongan seafarers.

4.2 Religious terms in Gilbertese

Many words connected with missionaries work and religion in general are borrowed from Latin, Greek and Hebrew. A good example is *ekaretia* "church" (cf. Modern Greek *εκκλησία* /ekklisia/). Religious terms of Classical origin are a common trait of many other Oceanic languages as well, cf. Tuvaluan *agelu* "angel", *ekalesia* "congregation", *aleluia* "Hallelujah" introduced through Samoan (Jackson et al. 1999).

5. Gilbertese loanwords in neighboring languages

Tuvaluan, a Polynesian language which has largely influenced Gilbertese in both pre-colonial and colonial times, has obviously loaned some Gilbertese words as well. These were mostly borrowed during the 20th century, when Tuvalu and Kiribati formed a single territorial unit, a British protectorate named Gilbert and Ellice Islands. Tuvaluans often worked on Gilbertese speaking islands and brought some Gilbertese words to their home islands, where exclusively Tuvaluan was spoken (Jackson et al. 1999). Just to give an impression of this bilateral process, here are some Tuvaluan words with transparent Gilbertese etymologies.

(6) kaleve (Jackson et al. 1999)
 TUV “toddy” < GIL *karewe* ‘sweet’
 (7) maneapa (ibid.)
 TUV “island meeting hall” < GIL *maneaba* “village meeting house”

6. Informants

EB — Erekana Maneteti Buake
 MT — Mary Tebuanna Ta'ake
 NM — Neisita Makoitaki
 RO — Rere Obaria
 SB — Samantha Kabuta Bele
 TJ — Tearaki Joy

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