BG Pulse Journal USA
ISSN:1947-2536 http://www.bgpulseusa.com/index.php/bg
BG PULSE JOURNAL

THE PRONUNCIATION OF BORROWED WORDS IN UZBEK AND ORTHOEPIC NORMS

Elmurodova Tursunoy G'ofurjon kizi
Asia International University, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Uzbek Language and Literature 1st year of master's degree

Abstract. This article examines the oral realization of borrowed (loan) words in the Uzbek language and the orthoepic norms that regulate their pronunciation. Over its long contact history, Uzbek has absorbed extensive lexical layers from Arabic, Persian-Tajik, Russian, and, more recently, English. Each donor language has introduced sounds and sound combinations that are foreign to the native Turkic phonological system, generating tension between written form and spoken usage. Drawing on descriptive phonology and the codified literary standard, the paper analyses how loanwords are adapted to Uzbek articulation, identifies the principal points of orthoepic variation, and discusses the normative and pedagogical implications of these discrepancies. It argues that a consistent, well-publicised orthoepic standard is essential for maintaining the unity of the literary language under conditions of intensive borrowing.

Keywords: orthoepy, loanwords, phonological adaptation, Uzbek language, pronunciation norms, vowel harmony, Russian borrowings, literary pronunciation, spelling–pronunciation correspondence.

1. Introduction

Language is a living system that constantly interacts with the surrounding social, cultural, and political environment. One of the most visible consequences of such interaction is lexical borrowing: the adoption of words from one language into another. The Uzbek language, situated for centuries at the crossroads of major civilizations, offers a particularly rich field for the study of this phenomenon. Its vocabulary contains substantial strata of Arabic, Persian-Tajik, and Russian origin, alongside an expanding layer of internationalisms and English terms that have entered the language in recent decades through science, technology, and global communication.

Borrowing, however, is not limited to the lexical level. When a foreign word enters Uzbek, it brings with it sounds, stress patterns, and sound combinations that may not exist in the native phonological system. The speaker must therefore decide how to pronounce the new word: whether to approximate its source pronunciation or to adapt it fully to native articulatory habits. These decisions are not arbitrary; they are governed by orthoepy — the branch of linguistics that establishes the norms of correct literary pronunciation. The relationship between borrowed words and orthoepic norms is consequently a matter of both theoretical interest and practical importance for education, broadcasting, and the cultivation of the standard language.

The aim of this article is to describe how borrowed words are pronounced in modern literary Uzbek, to analyse the phonological mechanisms by which they are adapted, and to clarify the orthoepic norms that apply to them. The discussion proceeds from the sources of borrowing, through the processes of phonological adaptation, to the codified norms and the principal cases in which spelling and pronunciation diverge.

2. The Sources of Borrowed Words in Uzbek

A clear understanding of orthoepic adaptation requires familiarity with the principal donor languages, since each layer carries distinct phonetic features that interact differently with the native system.

Arabic borrowings entered Uzbek primarily through religion, law, science, and literature. They introduced consonants and phoneme clusters that were uncommon in Turkic, as well as the glottal sounds rendered in writing by the hamza and the letter ‘ayn (e.g., ma’no, ta’na, san’at). Many of these words have become so deeply integrated that speakers no longer perceive them as foreign, yet their orthoepic treatment — particularly the realization of the glottal stop and of long vowels — remains a frequent source of variation.

Persian-Tajik borrowings, closely connected with classical poetry, administration, and everyday life, contributed a large vocabulary (e.g., dasta, devor, gul, oftob). Because of long and intimate contact between Uzbek and Tajik, these words are generally well assimilated phonetically, though certain vowel qualities and the pronunciation of the consonant rendered as “h” still display regional fluctuation.

Russian and, through Russian, international borrowings constitute the most influential modern layer. Entering intensively from the late nineteenth century and especially during the twentieth century, they brought sounds and combinations alien to Uzbek: the consonants “v”, “ts”, “shch”, voiced–voiceless oppositions in final position, and dense consonant clusters (e.g., traktor, avtobus, kontsert, vrach). This layer poses the greatest orthoepic challenges, because such words are frequently written in a form close to the Russian original while being pronounced in accordance with native articulatory tendencies.

English and international terminology represents the newest stratum, expanding rapidly in the fields of information technology, economics, and science (e.g., kompyuter, internet, menejer, fayl). These words often enter through written channels, which heightens the influence of spelling on pronunciation and makes the establishment of clear orthoepic norms especially urgent.

3. Phonological Adaptation of Borrowed Words

When a foreign word enters Uzbek, it is subjected to the phonological constraints of the receiving language. The degree of adaptation depends on the period and channel of borrowing, the prestige of the source language, and the speaker’s level of education. Several recurrent mechanisms can be identified.

Vowel adaptation. Native Uzbek prefers a limited and stable set of vowels. Foreign vowels that fall outside this set are replaced by their nearest native equivalents, and reduced or unstressed vowels of the source language are frequently realised more fully. In words borrowed through Russian, the unstressed reduction characteristic of Russian is often absent in Uzbek pronunciation, so that each vowel receives a clearer articulation than in the donor language.

Consonant adaptation. Consonants absent from the native inventory are systematically substituted. Sounds that are difficult in final position may be devoiced, and unfamiliar clusters are simplified. Historically, vowel epenthesis was a productive strategy for breaking up initial consonant clusters that Turkic phonotactics did not permit, yielding pronunciations such as “istakan” for stakan or “ishkaf” for shkaf in colloquial speech. While the literary norm now generally preserves the cluster in writing, the epenthetic pronunciation survives in informal and regional usage and remains an important object of orthoepic regulation.

Stress and syllable structure. Uzbek tends to place stress on the final syllable, whereas many borrowings carry stress elsewhere in the source language. In assimilated words, stress is frequently

shifted toward the native pattern, although learned and recent borrowings often retain the original placement, producing competing pronunciations of the same word.

The glottal stop and length. In Arabic borrowings, the sign that marks a glottal stop or compensatory vowel length (written with the apostrophe-like ‘) is realised variably: in careful literary speech it is preserved, lengthening or interrupting the vowel (e.g., ma’no, a’zo), whereas in rapid colloquial speech it is often dropped, with the vowel simply lengthened or shortened. The orthoepic norm requires its retention in the standard register.

4. Orthoepic Norms and Their Codification

Orthoepy (from the Greek orthos, “correct”, and epos, “speech”) is the system of norms that determines the standard pronunciation of a literary language. Whereas orthography regulates writing, orthoepy regulates speech; the two are complementary, but they do not always coincide. Orthoepic norms ensure that, despite dialectal diversity, educated speakers across a speech community pronounce words in a uniform and mutually intelligible way. For a language as dialectally varied as Uzbek, such norms are an essential instrument of linguistic unity.

The Uzbek literary pronunciation standard is based principally on the dialects underlying the modern literary language, supplemented by rules that account for the special behaviour of borrowed vocabulary. These norms are transmitted through dictionaries of orthoepy, grammars, school textbooks, the practice of professional broadcasters, and the speech of the theatre and public oratory. The mass media in particular play a decisive role in disseminating and stabilising the norm, since radio and television pronunciation serves as a model for the wider population.

With respect to borrowed words, the orthoepic norm generally pursues a balance between two principles. The first is the principle of assimilation, according to which a fully integrated loanword should be pronounced in conformity with the native phonological system. The second is the principle of source fidelity, according to which recent or learned borrowings — especially internationalisms — should preserve a pronunciation reasonably close to their original, so as to maintain international recognisability. The art of codification lies in determining, for each word or category, which principle prevails.

5. Discrepancies Between Spelling and Pronunciation

The most acute orthoepic problems arise where the written form of a borrowed word diverges from its recommended pronunciation. Because many borrowings, especially through Russian and English, are adopted in a graphic form close to the source, the spelling can mislead the speaker into a pronunciation that contradicts both native phonotactics and the established norm. Several typical situations may be distinguished.

Consonant clusters. Words with initial or medial clusters foreign to Uzbek (e.g., stansiya, plan, traktor) are written with the full cluster but, in spontaneous speech, are frequently pronounced with an inserted vowel. The norm must decide whether the cluster pronunciation or the epenthetic pronunciation is to be regarded as standard; in the contemporary literary language the cluster pronunciation is generally preferred in careful speech.

Final voiced consonants. Russian-origin words ending in a voiced consonant (e.g., zavod, klub) are commonly devoiced in final position under the influence of native tendencies, producing pronunciations with a voiceless final sound even though the spelling retains the voiced letter. Here the orthoepic recommendation typically follows the natural devoicing while the orthography preserves the etymological spelling.

The glottal sign in Arabic borrowings. As noted above, the apostrophe-marked sound in words such as ma’no and san’at is preserved in writing but variably realised in speech. The norm requires

its articulation in the standard register, since its omission can lead to homophony and a loss of semantic distinctions.

Vowel quality and reduction. Because Uzbek does not reproduce Russian vowel reduction, words borrowed through Russian are pronounced with fuller vowels than in the source. Spelling, which reflects the Russian vowel letters, may suggest a reduced reading that is foreign to Uzbek orthoepy; the norm prescribes the clearer native articulation.

Influence of writing on recent borrowings. For the newest English and international terms, which often enter through written and electronic channels, pronunciation tends to follow the spelling (so-called spelling pronunciation). This can produce forms that diverge from the original oral shape of the word, and it underscores the need for timely codification before unstable variants become entrenched.

6. Normative and Pedagogical Implications

The orthoepic treatment of borrowed words is not merely a descriptive concern; it has direct consequences for education, the media, and the broader cultivation of the standard language. Several practical measures can strengthen the stability of the norm.

First, orthoepic dictionaries should be regularly updated to include the rapidly growing layer of English and international terms, providing explicit, accessible guidance on their recommended pronunciation. Second, the teaching of orthoepy in schools and universities should be reinforced, with particular attention to the categories of borrowing in which spelling and pronunciation diverge. Third, professional speakers — broadcasters, teachers, and public figures — should be encouraged to observe the codified norms consistently, since their usage exerts a powerful normalising influence. Fourth, the relationship between orthography and orthoepy should be clarified for the general public, so that speakers understand that correct spelling and correct pronunciation are governed by distinct, though related, sets of rules.

7. Conclusion

The pronunciation of borrowed words occupies a central place in the orthoepy of modern Uzbek. The language's extensive contact with Arabic, Persian-Tajik, Russian, and English has enriched its vocabulary while simultaneously introducing sounds and structures that strain the native phonological system. Through processes of vowel and consonant adaptation, stress shift, cluster simplification, and variable realisation of foreign segments, Uzbek integrates these words into its own articulatory framework. Orthoepic norms arbitrate between the competing principles of native assimilation and source fidelity, and they are indispensable for preserving the unity and prestige of the literary language.

The principal challenge lies in the frequent divergence between the written and spoken forms of borrowings, particularly those adopted through written channels. Addressing this challenge requires up-to-date codification, systematic education, and the conscious cooperation of all who shape public speech. Only through such coordinated effort can the Uzbek literary language maintain a stable and authoritative pronunciation standard amid the continuous influx of new borrowings.

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