CHAPTER 8

SEMANTIC SHIFT

In the four previous chapters, the researcher has described and analyzed the non-native lexis under four lexico-semantic categories which have been further sub-divided into sub-categories, namely Lexico-semantic Reduplication, Lexico-semantic Redundancy, Similar Expression Substitution and Non-native Idioms.

In this chapter the researcher will describe and analyze the fifth category namely Semantic Shift which has been sub-divided into types. As with the earlier categories, the chapter will end with a summary and quantification of the data under the types into percentages and frequency counts.

'Semantic Shift' refers to English words which have lost their original colonial or British meanings and have acquired new non-native meanings. In addition, 'Semantic Shift' also covers non-native synonym substitutes for native words which may be semantically close to the intended meaning but are used randomly with no regard to the original native connotation. This is the case with 'Restricted Usage', whereby Crewe(1977) says that when using a word, Singaporeans frequently consider only its denotative meaning while ignoring its connotation.

Hence the overtones of meaning or semantic restrictions which are present in native usage, are often ignored in the non-native version.

Crewe illustrated this with the words 'uplift' and 'meted out' which are used with connotative senses which are inappropriate for the for the context of use:
a. The ten cents hike in bus fares failed to uplift services. ('Uplift' is usually applied to spiritual or improvement; 'improve' would be more appropriate)

b. The inquiry was in the form of questionnaires meted out to several people. ('Meted out' is used for carrying out punishment or punitive measures. More native alternatives would be 'handed out', 'distributed' or 'administered').

8.1 Description of Corpus

In the present corpus there were 19 examples of 'Semantic Shift' for which the ME users have either changed the native denotative meaning over the course of time, or ignored the native connotations in the usage of the words concerned.

8.1.1 bluffing wholesale

In the native sense to 'bluff' someone is to make someone believe that you will do something when you do not intend to do it, as in the sentence 'The boy was thinking up a clever bluff' (BBC English Dictionary). However, in ME the meaning has shifted semantically to mean 'to tell lies' or 'to be dishonest'.

In native usage one uses the term 'wholesale' to describe something one considers to be undesirable or unpleasant that one thinks is done to an excessive extent, as in the sentence, 'Wholesale slaughter was carried out in the name of progress' (BBC English Dictionary). Hence 'wholesale' is native but the collocation 'bluffing wholesale' is an ME expression meaning 'an elaborate lie'.

This example has been partly reconfirmed by earlier researchers. Killingley (1965), said that in 'Malayan English', which was the earlier term used for Malaysian English, 'bluff' means a 'lie or fib', 'to pretend to know' or 'to pretend to be clever'.

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Platt and Weber (1980) illustrated how the non-native term 'bluff' has been used for different grammatical functions in Singapore English. Sometimes it is used as a verb, sometimes a noun and sometimes an adjective. Each usage of the non-native term has a different meaning attached to it as shown in the given examples:

'The flowers, real one or bluff one?' (artificial)
'True lah! I never bluff you.' (I'm not kidding)
'Big bluff, man, hel' (He's just a show-off)

However, the Oxford English Dictionary, has given the meaning of 'bluff' as 'to hoodwink by assuming a fictitious bold front.' A derivative of this term which is often used in colloquial ME is 'bluffer' (see 'Derivational Variation').

8.1.2 briefing

In native English, 'briefing' means a meeting at which people are given information or instructions, usually just before they do something (BBC English Dictionary).

However, in the data, the writer of an article has semantically shifted this sense to mean 'a written article'. The following example has been taken from the Business section of the Sun newspaper:

'By the way, this will be the last Phileo-Edge briefing for the year.'

Besides the word 'briefing', the expression 'by the way' is also non-native usage which will be discussed under the category 'Register Mixing'.

8.1.3 comrades

In native usage, the word 'comrade' is only used in a limited sense namely, 'a person who is a member of the communist or socialist political party as the person speaking' or 'a friend or other person who works with you, especially soldiers during a war' (OALD, 2000).
In the following sentence, there seems to be a Semantic Shift of this sense, in the usage of `comrades' by one of the students in her Interactive Journal:

`Besides, I also learn to accept comments and critics from comrades or lecturers.'

8.1.4 corner shop

In native British English the term `corner shop' is a specific term for `a small shop, usually at the corner of a street, that sells food and household goods, as in the following context: `How do corner shops survive in the face of competition from large supermarkets?'

However, in the data, `corner shop' seems to be a synonym for `coffee shop', a small type of (traditionally Chinese) restaurant usually located in the corners of shop blocks: `I was having tea in the corner shop.'

Hence this can be considered to be an example of Semantic Shift from the native sense of the word.

8.1.5 diet of issues

At a recent conference on the English language, the following statement was made by the chairperson of the closing colloquium:

`We have had a diet of issues, over the past three days.'

The collocation of `diet' with `issues' could be considered non-native in the above context. The use of the word `diet' implies a controlled or restricted range of issues, whereas in the above context the speaker meant to say `a wide range of issues'. Thus the use of `diet' has the connotation of `limited range' rather than `wide range'. A native speaker would have said: `We have had discussions over a wide range of issues, over the past three days.' This shift in meaning could be regarded as `Semantic Shift'.

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8.1.6 follows bad things...duplicate

In the data, the following sentence seems to have two examples of Semantic Extension:

'If a leader follows bad things, the followers will also duplicate the same things.'

The BBC English Dictionary gives literal as well as figurative senses for the word 'follow'. In a literal sense one can follow someone else by moving along behind them; one can also follow a path or a river.

In a figurative sense, one can follow someone's instructions, advice or example by doing what they say or by doing what they have done. If you follow a particular course of action, you do something in a planned way. If you can follow an explanation or the plot of a story, you can understand it. If you follow a series of events or a television serial, you take an interest in it and keep informed about what happens. All these are native senses of the word 'follow'. However, none of these senses can be used to explain the above collocation of 'follows bad things'.

The word 'things' here could be explained as 'bad ways' or 'a bad example'. In a native sense, 'thing' is usually used as a substitute for another word when you do not want to be more precise or when you are referring to something that has already been mentioned, or when you are going to give more details about it. Here the usage seems to be the native sense of 'a word you are going to give more details about.'

Hence the word 'things' itself is native usage, but the word 'follows' is an example of Semantic Shift.

The second example of Semantic Shift seems to be the word 'duplicate'. It
has a literal meaning as well as a figurative one. Literally it means making exact copies of a piece of writing or a drawing. In a figurative sense, when an activity is duplicated, two or more people do the same thing. However, 'duplicates bad things' is certainly a non-native usage of 'duplicates.' It seems to be a Semantic Shift of the native meanings given to the word.

8.1.7 eyes

In native usage, when one 'eyes' something, one looks at it carefully or suspiciously as shown in the sentence: 'Rosy was eyeing the man carefully.' (BBC English Dictionary). Hence 'eyes' has a negative connotation. However, in ME there seems to be a Semantic Shift whereby 'eyes' is used with a connotative and denotative shift compared to its native sense. This is shown in the following article heading in the Business section of the Sun newspaper:

'Simex Chemical eyes 50% export sales by 2003.'

The non-native sense is 'sets a target of which has a new denotative sense and a neutral connotative sense.

8.1.8 itinerary

In native use the word 'itinerary' has a restricted sense of being 'a plan of a journey, including the route and the places that will be visited' (BBC English Dictionary).

In ME this word seems to have undergone Semantic Shift to mean something else as indicated in the following sentence heard during a dinner organized by undergraduates:

'The itinerary for tonight's dinner will be outlined by the Master of Ceremonies.'
Here the intended meaning seems to be 'items on a programme' rather than the native sense of 'a plan of a journey.' This usage of 'itinerary' was heard on a number of occasions, and it always seems to occur in spoken discourse.

8.1.9 legalistic

In native usage 'legalistic' means 'obeying the laws too strictly' as in the expression: 'a legalistic approach to family disputes' (OALD, 2000). However, the same word was used in a different sense at a recent conference on 'Language and Empowerment'.

One of the paper presenters uttered the following statement:

'The first day was too legalistic for me.'

She was a language researcher who was exploring the linguistic techniques used by lawyers to intimidate the witnesses. Her non-native definition of the word 'legalistic' was 'language that was too technical in a legal sense for a lay person to understand'.

Hence this non-native definition appears to be a Semantic Shift from the original native sense of 'obeying the laws too strictly'.

8.1.10 look forward to the consequences

In native usage 'consequence' means 'results of something that has happened' and it has a negative connotation as in the sentence: 'Two hundred people lost their jobs as a direct consequence of the merger' (OALD, 2000).

However, in the following sentence heard during a panel discussion, a student used this word with positive connotations:

'I have to admit here that we will have to look forward to the consequences of the progress.'

This non-native usage could be categorized as 'Semantic Shift'.

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8.1.11 pack

In native usage, the collective noun 'pack' is only used for animals in expressions such as 'a pack of wolves' or for inanimate things such as 'a pack of cards'.

However, in the following sentence recorded at a Toastmaster's meeting, the word 'pack' was used to refer to a group of well-dressed and well-mannered Toastmasters playing various roles at a meeting:

'The leader of the pack is the General Evaluator.'

Since this context is not even remotely connected to the idea of a pack of wolves, this could be regarded as an example of Semantic Shift.

8.1.12 pride as a young woman

The following sentence was seen in the Interactive Journal of an undergraduate:

'I was so particular about my pride as a young woman didn't create opportunities for people to talk low of me.'

In this sentence, the writer uses the word 'pride' which has the negative connotation of 'being snobbish' in native usage, to mean something closer to the native concepts of 'honour' or 'self respect', which have positive connotations. In addition, the expression 'talk low' refers to the Asian concept of provoking social disapproval which is a definite Semantic Shift from the native idea of 'talking in low tones'.

8.1.13 overspill

In native usage, 'overspill' has a very restricted meaning. It is an arrangement by which people are moved from an overcrowded city and are accommodated in new houses or flats in smaller towns (BBC English Dictionary).
However, the ME meaning is different from this native one as seen in the following utterance recorded at a Toastmasters' meeting:

'... an overspill of the Humorous Speech Contest.'

The speaker meant that the humour and good cheer at a meeting could have been a continuation of the prevailing mood of a humorous speech contest which had been held at another venue a week earlier. This idea is a Semantic Shift from the native meaning of 'overspill', namely moving people from overcrowded areas to less crowded areas.

8.1.14 running around

The following sentence was seen in the Interactive Journal of a student who was writing about his wife taking a break from her childcare duties when he was at home:

'She was at ease and she need not do the running around.'

In native usage, when someone is running around with somebody else he or she is spending a lot of time with that person. When someone gives you the run-around, you are treated badly by someone who is concealing the truth from you (OALD, 2000). The ME version in the sentence above merely means 'doing all the routine duties of a mother'. Hence there seems to be a Semantic Shift.

The expression 'at ease' is also an example of Semantic Extension (see 'Semantic Extension').

8.1.15 siphon

In native usage, siphon has a literal meaning as well as a figurative one. The literal meaning is 'to draw a liquid out of a container through a tube by using atmospheric pressure. The tube used for this purpose is also called a 'siphon'.

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In a figurative sense, if you `siphon off' money or resources, you cause them to be used for a purpose for which they were not intended.

This is the intended meaning in the following sentence:

`They were assured that there was no risk of the European countries siphoning off funds from the least developed nations' (BBC English Dictionary).

This figurative sense has a negative connotation unlike the more neutral connotation of the following non-native use of `siphon' found in the dissertation of a MESL (Masters of English as a Second Language) student:

`As the scope of inspirational writings get wider, there exists a need to siphon the different kinds of concepts.'

The above sense of `siphon' is to `organize' or `classify', and this seems to be an example of Semantic Shift from both native senses - the literal as well as the figurative.

8.1.16 snapped

In native usage, when used as a verb, the word `snapped' means to move something into a particular position quickly especially with a sudden sharp noise as in the sentence: `The lid snapped shut' (OALD, 2000).

It is usually used in a concrete or tangible context such as closing of the lid or snapping of the fingers.

In ME its usage is more figurative and seems to have undergone Semantic Shift as observed in the following sentence which was recorded from a Business news article: `UEM snapped a downward trend'.

This usage of `snap' seems to be non-native, as the native meaning of `snap' given above does not collocate with the abstract concept of `downward trend'. Perhaps the writer wanted to illustrate the sudden downward
movement of UEM share prices by using the word 'snapped' in this context. Hence this is an example of Semantic Shift.

8.1.17 stare

There were two sentences in which the word 'stare' was used in a non-native way. They are as follows:

'I stood in the middle of the school field and had a good stare at all the surroundings of the thick wilderness.'
'All I could stare was mountains, hills and thick forests.'

In native usage 'stare' is to look at something for a long time (OALD, 2000). In the first sentence, the adjective 'good' has a positive connotation and does not collocate with 'stare' which has a negative connotation of 'looking too long at someone to the point of being rude' in native usage. A native word which collocates with 'good' would be the synonym of 'stare' namely 'look'. In the second example, the word 'stare' is another example of Semantic Shift as the writer did not seem to have the negative connotation of the word 'stare' in the context of the sentence.

8.1.18 taking

The following sentence was seen in the instructions in an Oral Test paper:

'You are the Master of a student hostel near campus. You have just received a report that a group of students were caught taking other students' clothes from the laundry room.'

The word 'taking' has a neutral connotation in native usage, such as 'obtaining'. However, here it has the negative sense of 'stealing'. Hence the word 'take' which has a neutral sense in native usage, has acquired a negative non-native sense. This usage is an example of Semantic Shift.
8.1.19 value-added

The following sentence was seen in a Business news article:

'The main challenge is to higher value-added products.

According to OALD(2000), the term `'value-added tax' or `'VAT' is a technical British English term meaning `'a tax that is added to the price of goods and services' as used in the sentence: `'Prices include VAT as for example, $27.50 + VAT.' The above usage of `'value-added' is non-technical as the writer definitely was not referring to the `'VAT' but the addition of `'value' as meaning `'how much something is worth compared to its price' as in the expression: `'Charter flights give the best value for money'(OALD,2000).

8.2 Types of Semantic Shift

Basically, Semantic Shift involves the usage of native words or expressions which have shown non-native variations in meaning when used in Malaysian English. There are basically two types of Semantic Shift. The first type involves variations in the denotative meanings, and the researcher has termed this `'Denotative Semantic Shift' while the second type involves variations in connotative meanings, and the researcher has termed this `'Connotative Semantic Shift.'

The following is the analysis of three of the words which show Denotative Semantic Shift.

8.2.1 Denotative Semantic Shift

Word A: value-added(tax)

Native Meaning: tax added to price of goods and service
Non-native Meaning: giving the best value for money

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Word B: corner shop
Native Meaning: a small shop, usually at the corner of a street, that sells food and household goods.
Non-native Meaning: 'coffee shop', a small type of (traditionally Chinese) restaurant usually located in the corners of shop blocks

Word C: itinerary
Native meaning: the plan of a journey including the route and the places that will be visited
Non-native Meaning: items on a dinner programme

The following is an analysis of three of the words which show Connotative Semantic Shift.

8.2.2. Connotative Semantic Shift

Word A: pride as a young woman
Native Meaning: snobbish attitude
Non-native Meaning: self-respect/honour
(The Asian cultural value of self-respect for young women through proper social conduct is reflected in the expression)

Word: eyes
Native Meaning: looks at someone carefully or suspiciously
Non-native meaning: sets a target to achieve a goal

Word C: siphon
Native meaning: embezzle or misappropriate
Non-native Meaning: organize (different types of concepts)

From the above analysis, it can be seen that Denotative and Connotative Semantic Shift are quite different from each other. Denotative Semantic shift involves changes in the meaning while in the case of Connotative Semantic Shift the native word often loses its negative or positive connotation when used in a non-native context. Instead, it acquires a different connotation.

All the non-native words under Semantic Shift have been equally subdivided into Denotative and Connotative Semantic Shift as shown in Table 8.1 on the next page.
Table 8.1
Types of Semantic Shift

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8.3 Differences between Types of Semantic Shift

From the analysis of the three words from each of the two sub-categories, it can be seen that Denotative and Connotative Semantic Shift are quite different from each other. Denotative Semantic Shift involves non-native changes in the original native meaning while in the case of Connotative Semantic Shift the native word often loses its negative connotation when used in a non-native context. It then acquires either a neutral or positive connotation. An example of such a change in connotation is "running around" which has the native meaning of spending too much time with someone of the opposite sex and when someone gives you the run-around, you are treated badly by someone who is concealing the truth from you (OALD, 2000). In the data, the expression "running around" has the neutral meaning of "doing all the routine duties (of a mother, such as driving the children to various places every day)".

Among the examples of Connotative Semantic Shift, the use of the word "pride" in the expression "pride as a woman" could be regarded as similar to what
Dubey (1991) termed as a lexical item which has changed its sense to reflect the socio-cultural values of the users, who in this case are the members of the Malaysian Indian community. Hence there is similarity in Dubey's findings on Semantic shift and the data on Semantic Shift in the present study.