CHAPTER 9

SEMANTIC TRANSFER FROM MOTHER TONGUE

In the last four chapters the researcher described categories which have been sub-divided into sub-categories. In this chapter and the next six chapter, the researcher will describe and analyze the categories which has been sub-divided into types rather than categories. While the sub-division into sub-categories is based on lexico-semantic criteria. The sub-division into types is largely based on grammatical criteria.

9.1 Examples of Semantic Transfer from Mothertongue

Heah(1989) has used the terms 'loan translations' or 'calques' to refer to Semantic Transfer from Mothertongue. In loan translations the form and meaning of the word in the vernacular language is employed as a model for a translation equivalent in the English language. Bamiro(1994) in his study on lexico-semantic features in Nigerian English uses the term 'translation equivalents' to refer to a similar category. Anthonysamy has given the following examples using the word 'time': 'night time', 'rushing time', 'last time' and 'two days' time'.

In the data used for this research, those non-native expressions which clearly appeared to be translations from Bahasa Malaysia or the vernacular languages were identified as 'Semantic Transfer from Mothertongue'. Occasionally they could also be categorized under other categories as well. An example of another category is 'Non-native Idioms'.

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9.1.1 behind paper

When the researcher's daughter observed that re-cycled paper was being used to print out the current work, the following question was asked:

'The behind paper can be like that, ah?'

She meant the 'other side' when she said 'behind paper!' Perhaps this is a Semantic Transfer from Mothertongue as in BM the expression 'kertas belakang' would be used colloquially for the other side of a page. A native expression that could be used here would be the 'the flip side'.

9.1.2 by the name of lecturers, by the name of tutors

During an Oral interaction Test for undergraduates, the following comment was made about the potential success of a Tuition Centre which is run by the university:

'By the name of lecturers, by the name of tutors itself, it will work.'

This seems to be a direct translation of the BM expression 'di atas nama pensyarah....'

9.1.3 catching two fish with one hook

The native idiom is 'To kill two birds with one stone,' which means to achieve two goals with the same effort. The following non-native expression was heard during an Oral Test: 'catching two fish with one hook.'

This may be a Semantic Transfer from Mothertongue or a translation of: 'Menangkap dua ekor ikan dengan sebentar matakail.' Here the semantic sense has been adapted from the original native idiom, while the meaning is more culturally acceptable to Malaysians. No Malaysian in his right sense would kill birds with stones when he can catch them and sell them at a profit to
the pet shops! This non-native idiom can be categorized both as Semantic Transfer from Mother tongue as well as Adapted Idiom (see 'Adapted Idiom').

9.1.4 down the TV

In the following example of ME, the preposition `down' has been used instead of `under':

`Please look down the TV.'

The substitution of `down' for `under' is similar to the substitution of `up' for `on top of.' (Look under `up' in this section). This inability to differentiate between `down' and `under' could be a Semantic Transfer from Mother tongue. In Bahasa Malaysia, the word `bawah' is used for both `down' and `under', and the word `atas' is used for both `up' and `above'. In native English, `down' is strictly a directional preposition while `under' is a situational preposition. Bahasa Malaysia does not have any lexico-semantic differentiation between these two sub-functions.

9.1.5 feel something

A student teacher made the following comment during an Oral Interaction Test:

`We also will feel something if our personal belongings are checked like that.'

This appears to be a direct translation from Mother tongue: `berasa satu macam'. It means to be hurt by someone's lack of sensitivity to our feelings. Hence it can be considered as an example of Semantic Transfer from Mother tongue.

9.1.6 gone forward

In Bahasa Malaysia `mara ke depan' or `go forward' is a figurative expression for development or progress. In fact, the government agency which goes by the acronym, `MARA', has conducted many projects for the socio-
economic development or progress of the indigenous Malay people.

Thus the following use of the expression ‘gone forward’ could be a Semantic Transfer from Bahasa Malaysia or another mother tongue:

‘They have gone forward in their concept of an ideal beauty.’

The writer is a Singaporean who is writing her thesis for her Masters of English as a Second Language. The above expression ‘gone forward’ could also be categorized under ‘Non-native Metaphor’ (see ‘Non-native Metaphor’).

9.1.7 having all the smile on the face

This expression was used in the following way at a Toastmaster’s meeting:

‘...and at the same time, having all the smile on the face, take the challenge....’

This expression could be a Semantic Transfer from Mother tongue. In Malay this expression is ‘dengan bersenyum’ and the implication here is that the person who is about to ‘take up the challenge’ is happy to do so and sure of winning what ever it is there is to win.

9.1.8 high-tall

The following question was heard recently:

‘How high are you?’

In Bahasa Malaysia and the vernacular languages, there are no separate linguistic items for ‘tall’ and ‘high’. In BM, for example, ‘tinggi’ is used for both. This may account for the non-native usage of ‘high’ in the above question.

9.1.9 higher-go faster

In the following request, the ME speaker has used ‘higher’ where a native speaker would probably have said ‘go faster’:

‘Can you make the fan higher?’
The word 'higher' does not collocate with 'fan' in this context, unless the context changes and the speaker is asking a house builder to adjust the height of his fan!

9.1.10 hinting something

At a conference on Language and Empowerment, the following comment was uttered by a paper presenter:

'We are hinting something that is not our real intention.'

This could be an example of Semantic Transfer from Mother tongue as in BM, the word 'menyindir sesuatu' means 'hinting something'. Hence this could be a direct translation from BM. In any case this sentence also has an example of Ellipsis as in native usage the word 'at' would be included after 'hinting' (See 'Ellipsis').

9.1.11 in parallel with

The following comment was uttered by a student teacher during an Oral Interaction Test:

'This is in parallel with what Zahid said just now.'

The structure of 'in parallel' appears to be a Semantic Transfer from Mother tongue, especially BM: 'selaras dengan'. This expression could also be categorized under 'Non-native Metaphor' (see 'Non-native Metaphor').

9.1.12 play water

The following utterance was heard in the researcher's neighbourhood:

'Derek, don't play water.'

This appears to be a translation of the Bahasa Malaysia expression 'jangan main air'. Hence it could be considered an example of Semantic Transfer from Mother tongue.
9.1.13 rotating restaurant

The following utterance was recorded in a conversation with a young graduate:

'On top of KL tower there is a rotating restaurant.'

The standard native term is 'revolving restaurant' but the speaker has substituted it with a non-native synonym, 'rotating restaurant.' Though the concept of 'rotating' is not synonymous with that of 'revolving', they are semantically close concepts. It is possible that this is an example of Semantic Transfer from Mother tongue as in Bahasa Malaysia there are no separate terms for 'rotating' and 'revolving' as 'berpusing' is used for both concepts.

9.1.14 stepped my foot

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

'This is not the first time I stepped my foot in UM but it seemed like one.'

The non-native expression 'stepped my foot' seems to be a direct translation of the BM expression 'menjejak kaki'. A native speaker would have said 'stepped in UM'. As such, this could be considered as an example of Semantic Transfer from Mother tongue. It can also be considered an example of 'Non-native Metaphor' (see 'Non-native Metaphor').

9.1.15 talk low

The following statement was read in the Interactive Journal of one of the undergraduates:

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

Under 'Semantic Shift' it has already been ascertained that the word 'pride' here has a positive connotation of 'honour' or 'self respect' rather than the
negative native connotation of 'vanity'.

The writer, who is also a middle-class Malaysian Indian woman, used the expression 'talk low' to refer to the criticism of a woman's moral conduct by members of her community. In the Malaysian Indian community such social criticism usually results in a young woman's reputation being tarnished and this reduces her eligibility for marriage. It is a direct translation from vernacular Indian languages. As pointed out by Adegjiba(1989), such translations also reflect socio-cultural values that are familiar to the users of the expression but which may not reflect native English socio-cultural values. Dubey(1991) has also explained that there is Semantic Shift in the usage of terms such as 'homely' which in Indian matrimonial advertisements has a positive connotation unlike its usage among the native speakers. Such differences reflect differences in socio-cultural values between the native speakers and the non-native speakers.

It could also be a translation of the Malay expression 'cakap rendah tentang seorang' or 'talk disparagingly of someone'.

9.1.16 talk too softly

During an Oral Interaction Test, an undergraduate who is also a Primary School teacher made the following comment:

'If we talk too softly to the students they will repeat their actions.'

The use of 'talk too softly' in the above comment does not refer to the lowering of the volume of one's voice, but it refers to being lenient towards indisciplined pupils in class. The expression 'talk too softly' appears to be a direct translation from Bahasa Malaysia, namely 'cakap lembut'. Hence this could be an example of Semantic Transfer from Mothertongue.
9.1.17 throw words that hurt their feelings

The following sentence was heard during a leadership training course conducted by the Sai Baba organization:

'Besides that, they should not throw words that can hurt their feelings.'

The verb 'throw' has been used in a non-native way here. It is possible that it is an example of Semantic Transfer from Mothertongue: 'membaling kata-kata yang menyakitkan hati'.

9.1.18 tighten our new relationship

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

'I think this will tighten our new relationship.'

The word 'tighten' has been used non-natively here as a native speaker would have probably said: 'strengthen our new relationship'. The expression 'tighten a relationship' seems to be a translation of the BM expression 'mengeratkan perhubungan'. In this sense it is an example of Semantic Transfer from Mothertongue.

9.1.19 twist and turn

This expression in ME refers to the usage of deceit or cunning to conceal the truth when relating something to someone. The following remark was recorded in the researcher's data: 'Don't twist and turn your story.'

In the local languages the idea of 'twisting' has the figurative sense of being dishonest or changing the facts. As an example, the above sentence in Malay would have been 'Jangan memutar belitkan cerita itu.' This could be categorized as an example of Semantic Transfer from Mothertongue. It could
also be categorized as an example of 'Non-native Metaphor' (see 'Non-native Metaphor').

9.1.20 up the piano

In Malaysian English there is a tendency to use common substitutes such as 'up' and 'down' for less common words (Refer to notes under 9.1.4). In another example recorded from spoken ME, the word 'up' was used as a substitute for 'on top of':

'Look for my keys up the piano.'

This is another example of Semantic Transfer from Mother tongue.

9.1.21 You hope the fence to guard the paddy, but finally the fence eats the padi

During an Oral Interaction Test, a student made a direct translation of a Malay proverb:

'You hope the fence to guard the paddy, but finally the fence eats the paddy.'

The above is a translation of the Malay proverb: 'Harapkan pagar, pagar makan padi.' This expression is a loan translation which could be categorized under both 'Semantic Transfer from Mother tongue' as well as 'Local Idiom' (see 'Local Idioms').

9.2 Types of Semantic Transfer from Mother tongue

After analyzing the data it was found that there were three types of Semantic Transfer from Mother tongue, though a fourth type has also been discussed, which is more relevant to Redundant Superordinates. Table 9.1 below provides a quantitative analysis of the data using three types of Semantic Transfer from Mother tongue.
Table 9.1
Types of Semantic Transfer from Mothertongue

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Semantic Transfer from MT</th>
<th>Numbers</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Semantic Under differentiation</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>31.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Omission of Words</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Direct Translation of Idioms</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>59.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total No. Of Non-Native Lexis</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

9.2.1 Semantic Underdifferentiation

The first type involves 'Semantic Underdifferentiation' (Heah, 1989) whereby direct translations of vernacular prepositions, adjectives, adverbs or verbs are used by non-native speakers due to the fact that the vernacular languages use fewer lexical terms for the same entities compared to the English language. It was found that 7 or 31.8% of the examples in this category was of this type. Examples of these are shown below with the Bahasa synonyms and native equivalents given in brackets:

'Look down(bawah) the TV.'(under)
'How high(tinggi) are you?'(tall)
'If we talk too softly to the students they will repeat their actions.'(are too lenient)
'I think this will tighten our new relationship.'(strengthen)
'Can you make the fan higher?'(faster)
'The behind paperbe like that, ah?'
'Look for my keys up the piano.'
'On top of KL tower there is rotating restaurant.'

As shown above, there are altogether 7 examples of this type of Semantic Transfer from Mothertongue in the data.

9.2.2 Word Omission

The second type of Semantic Transfer from Mothertongue involves the omission of certain words as their equivalents would have been considered
redundant in the vernacular languages. Examples of these are given in the sentences below while the native equivalents are given in brackets:

`Derek, don't play water.' (play with water)

`We are hinting something that is not our real intention.' (hinting at something)

9.2.3 Loan Translation

A third type of Semantic Transfer from Mother tongue is the direct translation of idiomatic expressions from Bahasa or other vernacular languages into English. Eleven examples of these are shown below with the Bahasa equivalents given in brackets:

`catching two fish with one hook.'
("Menangkap dua ekor ikan dengan satu matakail\')

`We also will feel something if our personal belongings are checked like that.' (berasa satu macam\')

`They have gone forward in their concept of an ideal beauty.' (mara ke hadapan)

`This is in parallel with what Zahid said just now.'
(Native expression:  `selaras dengan\').

`This is not the first time I stepped my foot in UM but it seemed like one.'
(Native expression:  `menjejak kaki\')

`Don't twist and turn your story.'
(Native Expression:  `Jangan memutar belitkan cerita itu)

`You hope the fence to guard the paddy, but finally the fence eats the padi.'
(Native Proverb:  `Harapkan pagar, pagar makan padi\'.)

`I think this will tighten our new relationship.'
(mengeratkan perhubungan)

`...and at the same time, having all the smile on the face take the challenge....' (dengan bersenyum)

`Besides that, they should not throw words that hurt their feelings.' (membalancing kata)
By the name of lecturers, by the name of tutors itself, it will work.'
(Dengan nama pensyarah)

The twelfth example of a direct translation of a non-native idiom is 'too softly' in 'If we talk too softly (lemah lembut) to the students they will repeat their actions.' In the non-native sense, 'too softly' implies the connotation of being too lenient in maintaining discipline, while in the native sense it merely means 'in a whisper'.

The thirteenth example of a direct translation of a non-native idiom was seen in the Interactive Diary of a student:
'I was particular about my pride as a young woman and didn't create any opportunities for people to talk low of me.' It could be a translation of the Malay expression 'cakap rendah tentang seorang' or 'talk disparagingly of someone'. These can be considered as loan translations or calques from Bahasa Malaysia to ME.

9.2.4 Redundancy

A fourth type of Semantic Transfer from Mother tongue involves the use of redundancy as in the case of Redundant Superordinates.

Under the section on Redundant Superordinates are the redundant use of 'year' before a definite year as in '2002', the redundant use of 'number' before a definite number such as 'Number One' and the redundant use of 'colour' after a definite colour such as 'red in colour. This type of redundancy may be a result of Semantic Transfer from Mothertongue as in both Malay and Tamil these Redundant Superordinates are accepted as the norm.

In Tamil 'white' would be 'velai naram'(white colour) and seldom plain 'velai'(white) while in the Malay language 'warna putih'(white colour) is more
often used rather than plain `putih' (white)(See `Redundant Superordinates').

From the above four types of Semantic Transfer from Mothertongue it can be
seen that the English language has been used by Malaysians to convey
certain non-native cultural concepts and beliefs which are shared by the
non-native speakers and words expressing these are already present in the
vernacular languages. In the process, non-native features have developed
in the English used locally. These features bear a close resemblance to similar
expressions in the vernacular languages.

9.3 Reasons for Semantic Transfer from MT

There are a few reasons for this non-native category. The first one is the
tendency to leave omit lexical items such as prepositions which do not have
equivalent forms available in Bahasa Malaysia or the vernacular languages,
or to add redundant items which are not regarded as redundant in the
vernacular languages. Thus direct translations of vernacular concepts may
result in either omission or redundancy. An examples of omission due to
translation is:

`Derek, don't play water.' (main air)

A second reason is the tendency for ME users to directly translate idiomatic
expressions from Bahasa or other vernacular languages to English. An
example is the expression `You hope the fence to guard the paddy, but finally
the fence eats the padi' which is a direct translation of the BM proverb:
`Harapkan pagar, pagar maken padi.' This has also led to the tendency of ME
users to imitate the linguistic patterns of vernacular languages such as the
juxtaposition of superordinates together with subordinates. In the English
language this would be considered redundant. Under the sub-category
'Redundant Superordinates' we have mentioned the redundant use of 'year' before a definite year as in '2002', the redundant use of 'number' before a definite number such as 'Number One' and the redundant use of 'colour' after a definite colour such as 'red in colour. All these are examples of the carry-over of the linguistic habits of the mothertongue into their Malaysian English. An example of this redundancy in Tamil would be 'velai naram'(white colour).

From the above discussion it can be seen that Semantic Transfer from Mothertongue refers mainly to the transfer of linguistic habits of one's mothertongue to the English language used locally. It can also be seen that the English language has been used by Malaysians to convey certain non-native cultural expressions or ways of thinking which are shared by the non-native speakers. In the process, non-native features have developed in the English used locally. These features bear a close resemblance to similar expressions in the vernacular languages.

In the next chapter, the researcher will analyze and describe the largest category in the corpus of this study, namely Collocational Variation. This is a new category which has been created by the present researcher, and it involves both lexico-semantic as well as syntactic elements of non-native usage of English.