

Lexicalization by Malaysian Learners of English as a Second Language

Asha Doshi and Rajeswary A. Sargunan

Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya

adoshi@um.edu.my, rajesapp@um.edu.my

Abstract

Word-formation contributes a large number of lexical items to a language and it is a manifestation of a very essential aspect of language, that of productivity. In the early stages of language learning, learners are likely to adhere to norms of word-formation, producing familiar and regular lexical items of the language. In due course, having internalized the processes, learners extend their application in the formation of words.

This study investigates the phenomenon of lexicalization among university undergraduates in their English essays. A sample of 50,000-100,000 words is analyzed to study the processes of inflection and derivation of nouns and verbs in essays written by learners of English at the tertiary level. The various methods employed by the learners for the noun and verb forms in the essays are classified. In addition, nonce formations (as opposed to institutionalized forms), i.e. word forms coined by learners "on the spur of the moment to cover some immediate use" (Bauer, 1987: 45) applying English affixation rules will be analyzed. The findings from the study will contribute to a better understanding of the challenges faced by learners of English as a second language.

Keywords

Lexicalization, derivation, inflection

Introduction

In its simplest sense lexicalization is a kind of word-formation, where "something or some meaning" becomes a lexical item. Traditionally, studies on word-formation have focused on existing lexemes found in dictionaries, on productive patterns and regularities of word-formation. *Ad hoc* or nonce-formations of lexis were not given any attention (Lipka 1992:94). Early studies on "new" lexemes are those by Downing (1977) and Clark and Clark (1979). Both studies represented the existence of productive processes of word-formation resulting in new lexemes and new usages of existing lexical items. In any theoretical

discussions of word-formation processes, the phenomenon where new lexemes are coined must be taken into account. Lipka named this process lexicalization (1992:95).

1 Lexicalization

As lexicalization is viewed as a "notational term", "there is no single, correct definition of the term." (Lipka 1992:95). One dictionary definition (Mirriam-Webster 2006-2007) of lexicalization reads:

- "1 : the realization of a meaning in a single word or morpheme rather than in a grammatical construction
- 2 : the treatment of a formerly free compound, grammatically regular, and semantically transparent phrase or inflected form as a formally or semantically idiomatic expression".

An analysis of both definitions presents at least two aspects of lexicalization. First, lexicalization results in the creation of new words or morphemes previously not found in the language. Secondly, lexicalization results in semantic changes to existing lexemes in the language.

Lipka defines lexicalization "as the phenomenon that a complex lexeme once coined tends to become a single complete lexical unit, a simple lexeme" (1992:97). The process of lexicalization is a diachronic one, and an essential condition is that the particular complex lexeme must be used frequently (Lipka, 1992:95). One outcome of lexicalization is the irregularity it introduces into the lexicon (Ibid, 1992:97). For Kastovsky (1982 cited in Lipka 1992:95), lexicalization results in the integration of the new form into the lexicon of the language. The new form has semantic and/or formal properties which are different from the original constituents or word-formation patterns. Bauer (1983) and Quirk (1985) present other definitions of lexicalization,

further emphasizing it as a “notational term”.

2 Learners of English

The Malaysian society is a multi-cultural and multi-lingual mix of some major and minor ethnic groups that together contribute to its complex language situation. Amidst these languages the English language has its place. English in Malaysia is officially accorded the status of being the second most important language, after the national language, bahasa Malaysia (Malay). In the education system English is taught in all schools throughout the country as a subject and as of 2003, as a medium of instruction for mathematics and science.

For all intents and purposes, the English language has been made available to Malaysian learners from the day they begin school right up to the tertiary level. In reality the learners of English are a varied lot ranging from those who use English as a dominant language to those for whom it is a foreign language. The same complexities of proficiency and command of English are seen in students at universities.

3 The Study

The aim of this study is to identify instances of lexicalization in essays by learners of English from the Faculty of Law, University of Malaya. The data consists of a portion of a corpus of about 900,000 words from the MACLE project (Malaysian Corpus of Learner English) which was started in 2004 at the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya. A minimum of 50,000 words are organized and analyzed using NVivo 7 software.

Lexicalization by learners will be measured against standard English usage as presented in English monolingual dictionaries and grammar books. Any form that is different from the standard English forms will be considered instances of lexicalization. This includes the creation of new words or morphemes previously not found in the language and semantic changes to existing lexemes in the language. Lexicalizations will not be considered errors if they differ from standard English usage, but examined for the value they provide in understanding language learners' process of learning. Frequency of occurrence of a specific lexical item will not be a criterion.

4 Data Analysis

At this stage of data analysis no conclusive findings about lexicalization can be presented. What can be drawn from the preliminary analysis is that language learners do present instances of lexicalization based on the knowledge they have of,

for example, affixation in English. The suffix 'er' to form the item “sentencer”, for example is a case in point. More comprehensive discussion of the findings and conclusions will be presented at the conference.

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