Semantic Change in Words Borrowed From English to Urdu

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Abstract

The research investigates the semantic change in words borrowed from English to Urdu from a pragmatic perspective. The data for the research were collected through a questionnaire from one hundred volunteers from four universities of Pakistan. The analysis was done both quantitatively and qualitatively. The results revealed the new meanings of the English borrowed words used in Urdu. The quantitative analysis revealed about 69% of the words analyzed in the research did not imply the English dictionary meanings of these words. Additionally, the results depicted that for 11 out of 16 words analyzed, more than 70% of the participants of the questionnaire chose completely changed meanings when the words are used in the Urdu language. Words like 'light, 'press', and 'paste' have undergone a significant semantic change as in Urdu, these words mainly mean 'electricity', 'to iron', and 'to brush' respectively. Hence it may be argued that a substantial semantic change has occurred in the words borrowed from English into Urdu. The qualitative analysis proposed how those changes may have happened. It also strengthened the idea that the meanings may not be taken as isolated concepts; rather they are formed in a context depending on the implied meaning of the speaker.

Keywords: Linguistic borrowing, Semantic change, Implicature, Linguistic change

1. Introduction

The research investigates the semantic changes in words borrowed from English to Urdu language. The influence of English on many languages because of social power and prestige is undeniable, particularly in Asian countries. Yule (2010) defined linguistic borrowing as 'the process of taking words from other languages'. Labov (2010) points out that linguistic borrowing and semantic change are influenced by two major factors which are social and psychological. Haspelmath (2008) also includes psychological or behavioral aspects with historical and socio-cultural factors. In the context of borrowing of English words into Urdu these features are very much evident. This process may not be as simple as it may appear to be. Words have meanings that often change when borrowed from one language to another. 'Meaning' is an enigmatic reality that is yet to be comprehended fully. Leech (1981:1) rightly mentioned that "semanticists have often seemed to spend an immoderate amount of time puzzling the 'meaning of meaning". Consequently, when it is claimed that a word has undergone a change in its meaning that adds to the dilemma of the one trying to investigate it.

1.1 The Research Problem and Questions

As meaning cannot be observed, its change over time or 'cross-linguistic universality' cannot be studied as easily as one may study the change in the sound of a word (Riemer, 2010). Hence investigating semantic changes in borrowed words may not be entirely objective as the concept of meaning itself is abstract. However, by getting insights from the native speakers of a language about their usage of certain words, their meanings may be studied to some extent. The objective of the research is to analyze the semantic change in English words borrowed into Urdu. The following research questions are considered:

1. What are the new meanings given by Urdu speakers to the English borrowed words when they are used in the Urdu language?

2. How did the words change their meanings when borrowed from English into Urdu?

2. Types of Semantic Change

Earlier studies of semantic change used to focus on the result that comes out of the process of semantic change. The lists of changes were categorized as metonymic extensions, metaphoric, broadening, narrowing, etc. (Traugott, 2017). Working on linguistic borrowing, Haugen (1950) explored the aspects of semantic change. Describing the diachronic semantic change from Old English to Modern English, Yule (2010) mentioned broadening and narrowing as two contrastive processes of meaning change. Diau (2015) has worked on semantic change in detail. She has dealt with the consequences and nature that cause semantic change in the meaning of a word. She has claimed that the word formation processes are also responsible for the change in meaning. Bringing more multidimensionality in the semantic organization and lexical layering, Robert (2008) discussed semantic variations as an inherent aspect of any language. He has considered the context and discourse very important for the meaning of words. He further adds that polysemy as an important characteristic of words. Polysemy is also seen as significant by Reimer (2010) who claims that change in the meanings of a word is most often because of polysemous senses added to it. He also uses the term 'traditional

categories' to refer to broad categories of semantic change such as specialization, generalization, ameliorization, and pejorization. Additionally, he also mentions metonymy and metaphor to describe the semantic change in a better way than the traditional categories, however, to him even these two only describe the change and fail to give a causal explanation of the semantic change in words.

According to Reimer (2010), it is the inferences that are generated in discourse that actually determine the meanings. From the studies mentioned so far, it may be concluded that the studies in semantic change have shifted towards a more pragmatic approach where the idea that meaning is some isolated entity does not receive much appreciation. Interestingly, the work on linguistic borrowing reveals that not much research is available on semantic change that takes into account borrowing as the basic source of change.

3. Studies Investigating Semantic Change Across Two Languages

Bahumaid (2015) investigates English words borrowed into Hadhrami Arabic (spoken in Yemen). The researcher focuses more on the phonological and morphological changes in the borrowed words. He mentions the semantic change that occurred in the words by merely classifying them under the categories of broadening and narrowing. He has not explained the semantic change in the borrowed words but only confirmed that the borrowed words have expanded the Hadhrami Arabic lexicon. Akidah (2013) has focused on the phonological and semantic changes which occur in Arabic words after the process of borrowing into Kiswahili. Besides, phonological processes, he also discusses the change in the meaning of Arabic words in the context of amelioration, pejoration, and semantic broadening. Another study based on Arabic borrowed words in Urdu by Khan (2014) is merely theoretical and is very shallow in its approach. Khan (2014) only lists some changes in the meanings of Arabic borrowed words, but he does not analyze them according to any categorization or framework. The work on Arabic borrowed words in Urdu by Anwar (2017) is more systematic as compared to Khan (2014). She has argued that semantic change has an important impact on the cultural, social and linguistics life of people. She has established that the semantic change in the context of semantic shift, metaphor, amelioration, pejoration, narrowing, and widening has influenced the Urdu language significantly.

Hasan (2015) has elaborated on the semantic changes in certain Arabic borrowed words into the Bengali language which affects only the change in their denotative meaning. He has further discussed the main categories of semantic change, such as positive or negative semantic shift, widening, and narrowing. He has concluded that these Arabic loanwords are accepted when they enter into Bengali lexicon.

4. Changes in English Borrowed Words in Urdu

Sipra's (2013) work is perhaps the only published research to date that deals with the linguistic study of borrowing from English to Urdu. It is an invaluable study; however, it focuses more on the historical background of English-Urdu contact. It has also given a very basic analysis of the phonological changes in the English borrowed words in Urdu. It has also highlighted people's attitudes towards English in the sub-continent. Semantic change in the

borrowed English words is not been investigated in detail by Sipra. It may not be incorrect to suggest that there is a huge gap in research regarding , semantic change in English borrowed words in Urdu. This research aims at filling that gap to a small extent.

5. Conceptual Framework

As semantic change is concerned with the meanings of words and the meanings (sense) are abstract in nature; it is generally more complex to deal with as compared to the phonetic change. In order to overcome this challenge, the research employs a pragmatic and discourse based approach to the semantic change of words under consideration. Reimer (2010) identifies polysemy of meaning as a significant aspect while studying change in meanings of a given word. A theory of semantic change that employs both the pragmatic-discourse aspect and polysemy of meaning as its core concepts, is known as the **conventionalization of implicature.** In order to comprehend the reasons behind the changes in the meaning, instead of relying on more 'cognitive operations' like metaphor or metonymy, the pragmatic approach is more useful as it allows us to see **how** these changes become part of the lexicalized meaning of a word (Riemer, 2010). Hence the research exploits **conventionalization of implicature** as its central conceptual framework summarized in the following formula proposed by Riemer (2010).

A > A + B implicated > A + B polysemous (> B)

Keeping in mind the polysemous nature of the word A, it undergoes a change in two different stages. In the first stage, A has a certain meaning that is more conventionally used by the speakers, but it also may have an 'implicated' meaning B in a certain context. In the second stage of the meaning change, the implicated meaning used in the first stage becomes more widely used within the context that it first appeared in stage one. Eventually, as the final step in the change in meaning, the initial meaning A that used to be conventionally used by the speaker is replaced by the second use B. This is explained using the meaning change for the word 'accident' in English, from 'chance event' to 'unfavorable chance event' by Riemer (2010).

As this research goes beyond the semantic change within a language to the semantic change in words as they are borrowed from one language to another, this may be noted that not all semantic changes may be explained fully using the conventionalization of implicature theory. It is due to the fact that each language brings its own layer of complexities into the process of semantic change.

Moreover, using the conventionalization of implicature as the conceptual framework does not negate the cognitive process (es) involved in the actual meaning change in addition to the reasons for the change.

6. Methodology

The research employed both qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

6.1 Data Collection

There is a large number of borrowed English words used in Urdu, so as native speakers of Urdu language, the researchers randomly selected 16 such words that have been accepted as a part of daily communication by a wide range of Urdu speakers. These 16 words were used in sentences in Urdu and a closed-ended questionnaire was designed to investigate the possible change that has occurred in the meaning of these words. The questionnaire was written in Urdu and English as the participants were all literate (graduate or undergraduate students), it was easier for them to read the information written in English as well as in Urdu. The questionnaire offered three different meanings of the words being investigated for change as options to choose from (Appendix 1). These three options are as follows:

a. Meaning adapted from Merriam-Webster Dictionary of English Language

b. Meaning that the researchers expected to be the new meaning used by the Urdu speakers.

c. A random word used as a distractor

The frequencies of the respondents' choices of meanings were calculated manually. The data were then analyzed qualitatively using Reimer's (2010) framework.

6.2 Participants

There were 100 participants (both male and female) who were randomly selected, and they consented to take part in the survey. They belonged to different undergraduate programs from four different universities of Pakistan (University of the Punjab, The University of Lahore, University of Management and Technology and Mirpur University of Science and Technology).

7. Data Analysis and Discussion

As the first step of the analysis, data from the questionnaires were analyzed manually to generate the frequencies of various meanings chosen by the participants of the survey. This way the changed meaning of the borrowed words used in Urdu became more observable and it became easier to investigate the difference in the meaning used across the two languages under consideration. The frequencies of the meanings of the borrowed words as chosen by the participants are shown in Figure 1.

The highest frequencies reveal the new meanings that the majority of the sample population of Urdu speakers chose to be the meaning of the given English words. 11 (about 69%) of the 16 total words that were analyzed, showed significantly low (10 or less than 10 %) frequencies for the actual dictionary meanings of the English words borrowed into Urdu. This clearly illustrates that almost 69% of the total words that were analyzed have been remarkably changed in meaning i.e. their meanings in Urdu are almost entirely different from the meanings actually used in English.
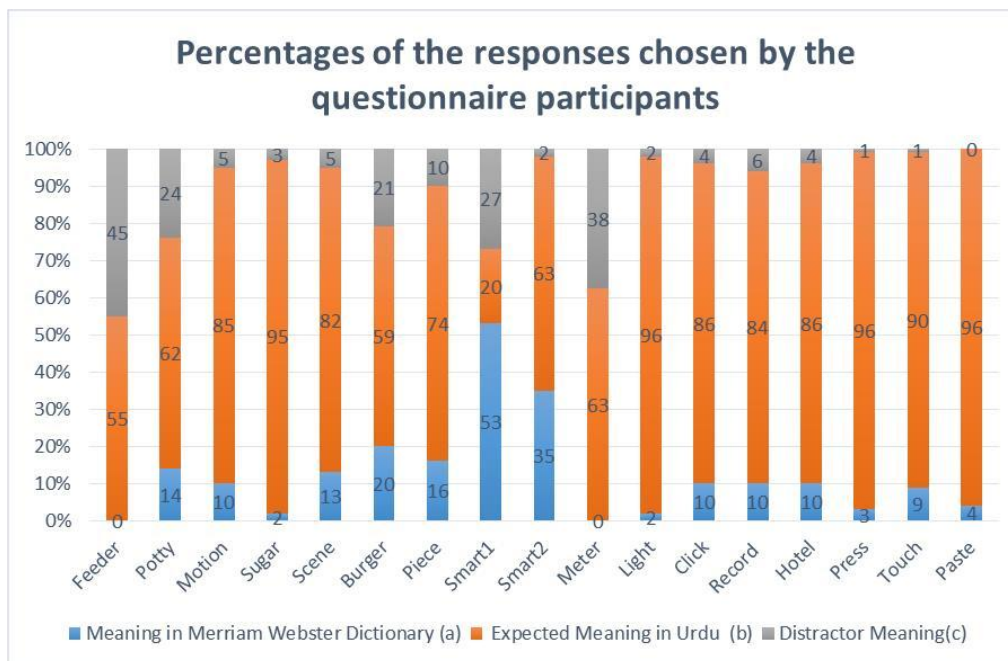
Figure 1. Percentages of the responses chosen by participants

It should be noticed that it is the linguistic context of the word that determined the choice of meaning for the participants of the survey. The meaning chosen by most participants was considered as the changed meaning of the English word as it is used in Urdu. The subsequent change in each given word is analyzed using the conventional implicature as the possible means of the semantic change. The simplified version 'a' of the original conventional implicature formula given by Reimer (2010) is used for the analysis.

a) **Borrowed English Word**: Meaning in English> Meaning in Urdu

With this formula in mind, the following analysis is carried out.

1.   **feeder:** feeding device for animals> feeding bottle (for human babies)

When an Urdu native speaker uses the word 'feeder' as a borrowed item in his language, the meaning is different from the actual meaning that is implied by an English speaker using it in the English language. The implicature that is conventionalized in Urdu is 'a device for supplying food for human babies' and the more general implicature of English language 'feeding device for animals' is abandoned as illustrated by the data collected in the research i.e. none of the participants used the actual dictionary meaning of the word 'feeder', 55% of the participants used the meaning 'feeding bottle' whereas 45% used the meaning 'milk' that was used by the researchers as the distractor meaning.

2.   **potty:** potty seat> poop

On encountering the word 'potty', an Urdu speaker would take the sense as 'poop' or 'defecation' (chosen by 62% of the participants) instead of the original implicature of the 'seat used for defecation' or simply a 'potty seat'(chosen by 14%). As 'potty' was borrowed into Urdu, the implicature of 'a place to sit or go to for defecation' was weakened while the

implicature where the sense of the word 'potty' actually meant 'poop or defecation' was conventionalized or strengthened.

3. **motion:** movement> diarrhea

4. **sugar:** sweet substance> diabetes

The change in the two lexical items may be explained in a similar way as the process whereby both the words underwent a semantic change appears to be similar. 'Motion' in English may be used to imply 'movement'(meaning chosen by 10% of the participants). If someone has diarrhea, there is more frequent 'external' movement of the person (due to his 'internal' movement of substances that are excreted out of the body at quick intervals) to go to the toilet. As this implied meaning of 'motion' used when talking about diarrhea was strengthened, the sense of motion to imply diarrhea became more conventional in Urdu. This is depicted by 85% of the participants who chose this meaning. Similarly, 'sugar' in a specific discourse in Urdu, implies diabetes, a meaning chosen by the majority (95%) of the participants, because during the process of semantic change the conventionalization of its implicature to give the meaning of a disorder in which there is an imbalance of blood sugar in the human body, was strengthened. Hence, the implied sense of 'sugar' shifted from 'sweet substance' to 'diabetes' in Urdu.

5. **scene:** setting> situation

The way 'scene' is used in Urdu after it is borrowed from English is more in the sense to imply 'what is going on', chosen by 82% of the participants, rather than to imply the sense of 'setting'. Although the sense 'situation' is used in English as well, the context in which it is used in Urdu is different. Additionally, it is this sense of 'situation' that is conventionalized in its Urdu usage and is replaced by its other sense 'setting' in the sentence, such as 'kia *scene* hey?' کیا سین ہے؟

6. **burger:** a kind of fast food> 'wanna be' (pretending to be of high social class)

Burger as fast food is an 'imported' food item that is not a part of Pakistani cuisine. Over the years it has become a commonly eaten food item in Pakistan. However, when it was first introduced into the Pakistani society, it was only the high social class that was privileged enough to eat burgers. Hence the concept of 'burger' was initially associated with the higher social class. The word 'burger' in English does neither mean high class nor was it ever used to imply high social class, in Urdu, it did have the implication of high social class once it was borrowed into Urdu. Over a period of time, the conventionalization of its sense to imply high class superseded the initial meaning of simply a 'food item'. This sense of the word has further undergone a change as in its current use in a context where an Urdu speaker uses the word 'burger' to describe someone; it is to imply that the person is 'pretending to be from high social class' (meaning chosen by 59% of the participants) when he is actually not. Hence the new sense of the word has negative meanings and may even be considered offensive.

7. **piece:** small broken part > slice

To an English native speaker, a 'piece' does not imply a 'slice' of an apple or a mango in the same way as it does for an Urdu speaker. In Urdu the borrowed word 'piece' has shifted to 'slice' from its sense in English; 'small broken part' and this conventionalization of its implicature as 'slice' is used by majority of Urdu speakers using the word 'piece' to refer to a 'slice' of fruit such as an apple. This meaning was chosen by 74% of the participants.

8. **smart[1]:** intelligent (unchanged) (used for a female)

   smart[2]: intelligent >handsome (used for a male)

The word 'smart' reveals an interesting aspect of semantic change whereby gender plays a vital role in the change of meaning. When used for a female 'smart[1]' did not change its meaning from the original meaning used in English as more than half of the sample population (53%)chose 'intelligent' as its implied meaning. However, interestingly, the meaning chosen by the majority of respondents (63%) when 'smart[2]' was used to describe a male was 'handsome' unlike its original implied meaning of 'intelligent'. The investigation into how gender influenced conventionalization of an implied meaning is beyond the scope of this research.

9. **meter:** unit of measurement> anger

The sense of meter implied by an Urdu speaker is not related to the sense implied. However, it may be concluded that during the process of 'meter' being borrowed into Urdu, it was used in a context whereby it was used to imply to someone whose 'brain meter' (if there were a device to measure someone's brain or sanity) was malfunctioning most probably due to being in a state of anger. Eventually, this sense was conventionalized in Urdu and now it is enough to say 'Your meter is spinning around' in the literal translation of the Urdu sentence ' tumhara *meter* ghoom gaya hy.' ۔تمہارا میٹر گھوم گیا ہے

This may be best translated as 'You have lost your mind due to anger.' in English. This sense of the word 'meter' was chosen by 63% of the respondents of the questionnaire.

10. **light:** something that makes vision possible> electricity

Since electricity does bring light to our life, as the term 'light' was borrowed from English it was conventionalized to imply electricity in the Pakistani context. This is illustrated by a substantial majority of the participants, 96%, choosing this meaning in the questionnaire.

11. **click:** a sharp sound> photo

For an Urdu speaker using the word 'click' the implied meaning maybe a 'photo' instead of its original sense in English. Conventional cameras used to have a 'clicking sound' and modern digital cameras also have the option to turn on the clicking sound when taking a photo, so this may have helped conventionalize this implicature of using 'click' to mean 'photo' itself. This meaning was chosen as the meaning in Urdu by 86% of the participants.

12. **record:** to store > make fun

This verb has a completely different implication in Urdu than its original implicature in English. 'Record' is a complex lexical item as it may convey multiple senses and is used in various grammatical forms; verb, noun, and adjective. One of the senses implied by the noun 'record' is to imply an extraordinary performance or unsurpassed statistics. As this lexical item was borrowed into Urdu, due to its polysemous nature (just like in the case of other lexical items considered so far) a confluence of its various implications along with the influence of the receiver language, the implicature that was conventionalized and is still a part of Urdu language is 'making fun (of someone)', chosen by 84% of the participants. It may also be seen as bringing someone's insult 'on record' The context in which it is generally used as this conventionalized implicature, is informal and does not have very seriously derogatory effects.

13. **hotel:** a building where people stay> restaurant

A 'hotel' will generally have a restaurant for the people using its service. In Urdu, this implication was conventionalized to use 'hotel' to even refer to a restaurant. Hence 86% of the questionnaire participants believed that the meaning of the word 'hotel' is 'a restaurant'.

14. **press:** squeeze> iron

To 'iron' clothes, the iron needs to be *pressed* against the clothes. During the process of 'iron' being borrowed into Urdu to become a part of its informal diction, this implication to the 'action' of ironing was conventionalized and now instead of 'ironing' clothes, an Urdu speaker may just 'press' them. Hence, in Urdu when someone says 'میں نے کپڑے پریس کر لیے ہیں' 'I have *pressed* my clothes', that actually means he has 'ironed' his clothes. This meaning of 'press' was chosen by 96% of the participants.

15. **touch:** feel> short visit

This lexical item 'touch' is also complex and since it may convey numerous senses in different contexts, in Urdu the implicature that is conventionalized is used in a context where one invites someone for a 'short visit' to his place. 'Touch' may imply 'feel' but it may also imply 'to make an incidental stop' in the English language. Hence it is not as surprising to see it being conventionalized to imply 'a short visit' in Urdu, a meaning chosen by 90% of the participants.

16. **paste:** to stick something> to brush

The final lexical item on the list 'paste' is used to imply various senses. In its use as a verb, it may imply to 'stick something', however, in its noun form, it may imply a 'dough-like' consistency of food or something else. A compound noun in English used to refer to a substance used for cleaning teeth is 'toothpaste'. In Urdu, this implicature that is used in its noun form in English, is conventionalized to imply the 'action' of cleaning one's teeth. So an Urdu speaker may say ' میں دن میں دو بار دانت پیسٹ کرتا ہوں ' 'I *paste* my teeth twice a day'.

8. Conclusion

As words are borrowed from one language to another, they undergo semantic change. The research investigated this change in English borrowed words in the Urdu language. The quantitative analysis revealed about 69% of the words analyzed in the research did not imply the English dictionary meanings of these words. These words are 'feeder', 'motion', 'sugar', 'meter', 'light', 'click', 'record', 'hotel', 'press', 'touch', and 'paste'. Additionally, the results illustrated that for 11 out of 16 words that were analyzed in the research, more than 70% of the participants of the questionnaire chose completely changed meanings when the words are used in the Urdu language. Words like 'light, 'press', and 'paste' have undergone a significant semantic change as they mainly mean 'electricity', 'to iron', and 'to brush' in Urdu. Hence it may be argued that a substantial semantic change has happened in the words borrowed from English into the Urdu language. The qualitative analysis proposed how those changes may have happened. It also strengthened the idea that the meanings may not be taken as isolated concepts; rather they are formed in a context depending on the implied meaning of the speaker. The analysis showed how the meaning of a word in English means something completely different than the meaning that is implied by the Urdu speakers when they use the same word changing its context to a newly developed context based on their own language. This research was limited to only 16 borrowed words and due to time constraints, the data were collected only through closed-ended questionnaire. A more exhaustive diachronic, corpus investigation into the borrowed English words into Urdu may be carried out in the future.

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Appendix

Appendix 1

Different meanings of words borrowed from English into Urdu used in the questionnaire.

Borrowed Word	Meaning adapted from Merriam Webster Dictionary (a)	Expected Meaning (b)	Distracter Meaning (c)
Feeder	feeding device for animals	feeding bottle	milk
Potty	pot for urination or defecation	poop (passed stool)	pee (urine)
Motion	movement	diarrhea	vomiting

Sugar	sweet substance	diabetes	sick
Scene	a view	situation	setting
Burger	a kind of fast food	wannabe (pretending to be from a high social class)	stupid
Piece	small broken part	slice	portion
smart[1(female)]	intelligent	skinny	beautiful
smart[2(male)]	intelligent	handsome	rich
Meter	unit of measurement	anger	sanity
Light	something that makes vision possible	electricity	glow
Click	a sharp sound	photo	pen
Record	to store	make fun	respect
Hotel	a building where people stay	restaurant	canteen
Press	squeeze	iron	washed
Touch	Feel	short visit	mark
Paste	to stick something	to brush	to walk

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