‘Creative’ hybrid compounds in New Zealand English: a conceptual analysis

As almost every English variety, New Zealand English (NZE) has been subject to language contact which has marked its development and contributed to shape its own peculiar features. The recent migration of Fijian and Samoan people to NZ has also affected NZE but the Polynesian language which mostly influenced and is still influencing the language of Aotearoa (indigenous name of the country) is Maori (Benton 1985). Due to its status as a minority language, the impact Maori has had on NZE is mainly lexical, and it is observable in the presence of lexical borrowings which uniquely characterize this Australasian variety (Kennedy 2001, Kennedy and Yamazaki 1999).

The present study investigates morphological productivity in NZE by focussing on the creation of hybrid compounds such as, ‘country marae’ (communal gathering place in the countryside), ‘rugby mana’ (the power of rugby) and ‘iwi affiliation’ (tribal affiliation). The analysis will rely on semantic frame theory as ingeniously developed by Fillmore in his work (1985, 1982, 1977) to shed some light on the complex conceptual relation between compound constituents. Furthermore, the creation of hybrids will be explained by means of conceptual metaphor/metonymy theory (Lakoff and Johnson 2003) and the principle of analogy. Data for the analysis will be taken from Macalister’s A Dictionary of Maori Words in New Zealand English (2005), which counts nearly one thousand entries, 5% of which are hybrid compounds (this percentage is slightly higher if subentries are also considered).

The creation of the first hybrids dates back to the early stage of settlement and their number has greatly increased since then, particularly in recent times (Schneider 2007). This fact is no doubt a sign of the larger integration of Maori into NZE. However, the phenomenon should be considered with care since the internal conceptual structure of hybrid compounds might reveal different semantic processes at work. Indeed, the application of semantic frame theory to the analysis of hybrids enables to rate these formations according to degree of ‘creativeness’ (Benczes 2006). ‘Purely creative’ compounds testify for the interaction between the two languages at a far deeper level than other non- or less-creative compounds can do. In this sense, cognitive linguistics, and semantic frame theory in particular, may certainly be of some help to sociolinguistically-oriented studies on endangered languages, especially in contexts of language contact.

References


