

CHAPTER 6

Imperfectives in Singapore's Indian community*

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This chapter examines the sociolinguistics of the Indian community in Singapore, with a particular emphasis on the use of the *-ing* marker among Tamils. The Indian diaspora in Singapore is of interest because the community differs from others in many respects: although a minority of less than 10 percent, Indians enjoy constitutional recognition, primarily through the use of Tamil as one of the four official languages. Furthermore, they are a firmly established ethnic group within the country, both socially and economically, having been instrumental in early colonial times and during the foundation phase of present-day Singapore English. Our study, drawing on data collected from 96 informants coming in equal parts from the Tamil, Chinese, and Malay communities, investigates the **use of** over-extension of *-ing* as a marker of all imperfectives, including statives and non-delimited habituals. We found the Tamils rating *-ing* as acceptable significantly more frequently than the other two groups in the case of statives and non-delimited habituals. As this parallels the Tamil aspectual system, our findings strongly support a substratist explanation for the Indian Singapore English aspect system.

Keywords: Singapore English, ethnic variation, sociolinguistics of Indian Singaporeans, Indian diaspora in Singapore, Tamil

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1. Introduction

The Indian community of Singapore is the smaller of two officially recognised minorities in the city-state: at just over 9 percent, they are outnumbered by the indigenous Malays (13 percent) and the majority Chinese (74 percent). Despite their small number (348,000 out of a total resident population of 3.77 million), Indians are intimately tied to the history of Singapore and to its present-day population. This is due to three main reasons: firstly, ethnic Indians have been present in the city-state since its founding in 1819; secondly, Indians were significantly represented in the colonial civil service and the upper echelons of society (a situation that continues, somewhat, to this day, with a respectable number of Indian politicians); and thirdly, and perhaps relatedly, they are the ethnic group that boasts the highest rate of English as a home language.

Singapore's Indian community is different from some other communities of the Indian diaspora in several ways. For one, there is the high level of English use at home (Indians 42 percent, Chinese 33 percent, Malays 17 percent), which is, in part, a result of language policies in place in Singapore, which put a strong emphasis on English as the medium of education and generally the country's "working language", something also seen in Trinidad (Leung & Deuber). Another way in which Singapore differs is in its (at least statutory) high regard for the Indian community: the Indians are a recognised indigenous "race", and are assigned one of the country's four official languages, Tamil. This choice of Tamil was motivated by its status as the majority language in the community.

Given the high level of English use in the Indian community as compared to the other two, larger Chinese and Malay communities, the question arises as to how and to what extent the Englishes spoken by these three groups differ. Ethno-linguistic variation in Singapore having, thus far, largely been confined to phonetics and phonology, there is a need for more research on variation in grammar. The aspect system is of particular interest in the Singaporean case, since it has attracted some interest, particularly with respect to its origin in a putative Chinese substrate (Bao 2005). Coupled with the potential similarities with Indian English (Sharma 2009), this raises the question as to how the aspect system of Indian Singapore English behaves relative to the other two ethnic varieties.

2. Historical background

Singapore, one of the last few remaining city-states, is an island nation of some 700 km² located at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula. This former British colony, founded in 1819, currently has a population of just over 5 million. The

location of the port city on the lucrative shipping route from Hong Kong to India and, eventually, via the Suez Canal, to Europe and Britain, made it a prime choice for settlement by the British, as well as for subsequent immigrants in search of work or business opportunities. While the indigenous, pre-British population was around 1,000 (Turnbull 1996, 5), immigration from various parts of the world soon boosted that number. The population of Singapore is traditionally divided into four “ethnic” groups: the 2010 census reports 74.1 percent of Chinese, 13.4 percent of Malays, 9.2 percent of Indians, and 3.3 percent of “Others” (Wong 2011a). These four groups are the present-day result of immigration, primarily from southern Chinese provinces, from colonial British territories on the Indian subcontinent, and from the Malay Archipelago.

While there was contact between India and pre-colonial Singapore and Malaya (Sandhu 1969, 21–22), the first substantial group of Indians in modern Singapore arrived with the British in 1819. There were, according to Sandhu (1993, 774), around 120 Indians on Stamford Raffles’ landing party, mostly *sepoys* (‘soldiers’), *lascars* (‘sailors’), and servants, but also at least one trader. The *sepoys* were from the Bengal Native Infantry, and the servants from a Bazaar Contingent. This first group was “known locally as ‘Bengalis’” and in all likelihood “came from what is now eastern Uttar Pradesh and northwest Bihar, then the principal recruiting ground for *sepoys* of the Bengal Native” (Lal 2006, 176). As the port of Singapore prospered and the settlement grew, it attracted more immigrants from the three main regions mentioned earlier. The Indians came either directly from India or from pre-existing British settlements in Malaya (primarily Malacca and Penang on the west coast of the Peninsula), and can be grouped, for convenience, into three categories. The first comprises convicts and soldiers and is a testimony to Singapore’s early days as a penal colony. Convicts were brought in from all over British Southeast Asia as well as directly from India. Many were trained, by their guards, in useful trades and contributed extensively to the building and maintenance of the infrastructure of early Singapore: in the words of Sandhu (1993, 775), “for years the history of these convicts was the history of the Public Works Department”. Upon release, they either returned to India, moved to neighbouring Malaya, or stayed on in Singapore. The soldiers were part of the British Indian Army, and largely stationed in their barracks with little contact with the local population. Their presence was also transitory in that they could be redeployed to other locations in case of military need. However, “while few [...] remained in Singapore at the end of their tour, the persistence of a *dhobi* community from early times suggests that some members of the Bazaar Contingent left the garrison to assume the role of civilian immigrants in the new settlement” (Lal 2006, 176). Their linguistic make-up is hard to define with certainty; convicts “represented a cross-section of Indian society” (Lal 2006, 177) and came from a range of

ethnic and linguistic background. As for the soldiers, Turnbull (1996, 126) also mentions the Indian Army 5th Light Infantry, which consisted entirely of Panjabi Muslims.

The second group of early Indians includes traders and labourers. Indentured labourers were in high demand, initially for rubber plantations and tin mines, later for building and construction work. “The vast majority came from Tamil Nadu” (Lal 2006, 178). The Indians also had a near-monopoly in the laundry business. Traders and businessmen arrived both directly from India and from the Straits Settlements, attracted by the business opportunity offered by the tariff-free port of Singapore. These merchants were instrumental in building up the local economy, and in creating and maintaining economic ties with both the other Straits Settlements and the Subcontinent. Tamils were in a majority in this group, hailing from both Ceylon and the mainland, though a number of them would have come from further inland.

The third category consists of English-educated migrants, who were drawn in to help administer the colony as civil servants, teachers, interpreters, clerks, and lawyers. Many came from Sri Lanka and South India, with Malayalis and Sri Lankan Tamils in a majority (Lal 2006, 178). The police force (recruited from the 1870s) was also largely Indian, with many Sikhs (Mani 1993, 790–791) who were also “sought after as security personnel” (Lal 2006, 178). This group certainly had an impact on the English language in Singapore because, though comparatively small (see Table 6.1), they were strongly represented in the civil service and the education system. Their language would have been English, complemented with their ethnic languages (Tamil, Malayalam, Panjabi, Gujarati, etc.). In a classroom setting, the colonial standard of English would have been the target variety.

The demographic evolution of the Indian population of Singapore is given in Table 6.1, which shows data from the first census in 1821 to the most recent one in 2010. The census category “Indian” comprises a host of populations from the Indian sub-continent, including Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Self-reported membership of a particular sub-group in the “Indian” ethnic group, as given in the 2010 census, gives some indication of where in India the initial Indian migration to Singapore originated. The largest groups were the “Tamil” (54.2 percent), the “Malayalee” (7.6 percent), “Hindi” (3.8 percent), and “Sikh” (3.7 percent), with 6 other named groups and many more at less than 2 percent of the ethnically Indian population. These numbers include changes since the 2000 census: Tamil respondents have dropped by 4.1 percentage points, while Hindis increased by 2.2 points and “Others” by 5.2 points. Table 6.1 shows the percentage of Indians that are likely to have a Dravidian language as their (current or ancestral) mother tongue – “likely” because of the problematic equation between ethnic (sub-) group and language.

Table 6.1 Indian population in Singapore. Data 1821–1980 from Sandhu (1993, 775), 1990 from Shantakumar (1993, 867), and 2000–2010 from Wong (2011a)

Year	Number of Indians	% of total population	Dravidians as % of the Indian ethnic group ¹
1821	132	2.8	
1871	11,501	11.8	86.6 (1881)
1891	16,035	8.7	78.0
1911	28,454	9.2	84.3 (1921)
1931	50,860	9.4	79.3
1947	68,978	7.7	74.1
1957	124,084	9.0	79.9
1970	145,169	7.0	80.6
1980	154,632	6.4	71.9
1990	190,900	7.0	72.5
2000	257,866	7.8	66.7
2010	348,119	9.2	61.7

These sub-groups are frequently termed “dialect groups” in Singapore, a characterisation which, as pointed out elsewhere (Leimgruber 2013), is a misnomer, because language and ethnicity are blended beyond recognition. Assignment to a particular sub-group is based on self-reporting during census exercises. As a result, a largely English monolingual respondent can still identify as ethnically Tamil. Furthermore, the term *dialect* glosses over the massive linguistic differences among Indian languages, which belong to two entirely separate language families (Dravidian and Indo-Aryan).

Singapore's English-speaking population has grown rapidly in recent decades (see below). In colonial times, English was restricted to British rulers and European merchants in the city as well as to a small minority of educated subjects (predominantly Indians, but also others) working in the civil service and in the education sector. It was also used by the Eurasian and the Peranakan (wealthy mixed Malay-Chinese community, “Straits-born Chinese”) communities that were first to switch to English as a language of education and as a home language. Wealthy families in the Indian and Chinese community soon followed suit. The shift towards English is ongoing, with stratification along socio-economic, educational,

1. The naming of sub-groups within the ‘Indian’ category has changed several times over the various censuses. Thus, for instance, between 1931 and 1970 there was a group ‘Ceylon Tamil’ in addition to ‘Indian Tamil’. ‘Dravidians’ in this table refers to those identifying as ‘(Indian/Ceylon) Tamil’, ‘Malayali’, and ‘Telugu’, but does not include the ‘Other Indian’ category, which may well contain some speakers of Dravidian languages.

and generational dimensions. As a rule, the young are English-dominant, English having been the sole medium of education in all state schools since 1987.

3. Singapore's Indian community

A first broad way of defining the group 'Indians in Singapore' may be in terms of nationality and residency status. Indians can be divided into two groups: (1) Singapore citizens, known as 'Singaporean Indians', or 'local Indians', who are the locally born second, third, fourth or even fifth generation descendants of immigrants from South Asia and (2) more recent Indian immigrants or 'Indian Indians' who can be sub divided into (a) low-income unskilled workers and (b) high income professionals or entrepreneurs. Group (a) immigrants are only allowed work permits which allow them to reside in Singapore for a limited period of time. By contrast, group (b) immigrants are given employment passes which are renewable and which give them eligibility to apply for permanent residency or even Singapore citizenship. All Foreign Nationals or 'Indian Indians' have strong transnational ties with India, unlike local Singaporean Indians.

There is no real 'pan-Indian' identity in Singapore because of the diverse economic, language and cultural backgrounds. This heterogeneity is evident at several levels: The ethnic diversity in the population was mentioned above. Religious diversity also exists, the population consisting of 59 percent Hindus, 22 percent Muslims, and 13 percent Christians. In terms of linguistic diversity, it is unfortunate that the census only records Tamil and "other Indian languages", such that a closer analysis of the latter is less straightforward. One number that the census does report, however, is that of the "language most frequently spoken at home". The 2010 census (Wong 2011a) reports home language use to have changed somewhat since the previous (2000) census: the self-reported dominant home language has seen an increase of English and a decrease of both Tamil and Malay (see Table 6.2). The presence of Malay as an important minority language among the Indians will be discussed later; suffice it to say that it is associated with

Table 6.2 Self-reported dominant home language within the ethnically Indian population. Data from Leow (2001) and Wong (2011a)

Dominant home language	2000	2010
English	35.6	41.6
Tamil	42.9	36.7
Malay	11.6	7.9
'Other Indian languages'	9.3	13.2

Muslim Indians who share their religion with the Malays, the other major minority of Singapore. The shift towards English is a phenomenon observed across the whole population, the education policy of having English as the main medium of instruction having probably played an important role in this shift. It remains, however, that at 41.6 percent, the Indians are the ethnic group with the highest percentage of English as a home language: this number is at 32.6 percent for the Chinese and 17.0 percent for the Malays.

There are few other tangible ways in which the Indians are distinctly different from the rest of the Singaporean population. For instance, their socioeconomic distribution, as measured by gross monthly income, patterns almost exactly like that of the Chinese population (unlike the Malays, who have higher percentages in the lower income groups). Similarly, traditional settlement patterns, which used to follow a strongly segregational system under colonial rule, have broken down substantially, especially since the introduction of ethnic quotas in public housing new towns, where 87.7 percent of the population lives (Wong 2011b). What remains is the traditional area of Little India along Serangoon Road, which is still reputed as a prized tourist spot for its concentration of Indian restaurants and businesses. Notwithstanding Little India, it is fair to say that in the city-state, Indians are a minority in any neighbourhood.

It is perhaps in the domain of language policy that the Indian population is treated somewhat differently from the other two indigenous ethnic groups. A first difference resides in the governmental efforts aimed at engineering the populations' linguistic skills. There have been two major campaigns with two targets: the Speak Mandarin Campaign, launched in 1979 and aimed largely at the Chinese population, and the Speak Good English Movement, launched in 2000, which targeted the whole (English-speaking) population. The annual Speak Mandarin Campaign (SMC) has had different emphases in the past, but it is broadly concerned with promoting the use of Mandarin and demoting the use of other varieties of Chinese. The SMC has been the subject of much research (see, *inter alia*, Bokhorst-Heng 1999; Wee 2006) and has, if census data are to be trusted, been highly effective: whereas in 1980, 10 percent of Chinese spoke Mandarin as a home language and 60 percent used the "dialects", these numbers had changed, by 2010, to 48 percent and 19 percent, respectively (Pecotich & Shultz 2006; Wong 2011a). The Speak Good English Movement (SGEM), also subjected to scholarly research (see e.g. Rappa & Wee 2006), has been targeting English users and initially aimed to eradicate the use of "Singlish" (Colloquial Singapore English) in favour of Standard English. Its success is much more difficult to measure, since it is unclear what kind of English (Singlish or Standard) respondents to the census question on main home language actually use. In sum, Mandarin and Standard English benefit from enormous governmental attention, have their status and

airtime on public broadcasting promoted, and are being commented upon favourably year-round by ministers and officials, often with a rhetoric involving cultural heritage (Mandarin) and economic capital (English, but increasingly also Mandarin). In stark contrast, Malay and Tamil, the other two official languages, while usually acknowledged as being important “mother tongues”² (more on this term later) of the two minority ethnic groups, do not benefit from wide-ranging campaigns such as the SMC or the SGEM. Particularly when the discussion is framed in economic terms, Tamil is rarely mentioned, as business with India is overwhelmingly carried out in English. Given the status of Malay in Singapore’s neighbouring countries (especially Malaysia), Malay enjoys a slightly more privileged position, cemented, in part, in its constitutional status as the national language (in addition to its official status, shared with English, Mandarin, and Tamil).

A second difference lies in the so-called “mother tongue” policy, which assigns a “mother tongue” to each of the three ethnic groups: Mandarin for the Chinese, Malay for the Malays, and Tamil for the Indians. The ethnic mother tongues are official languages, joined in this status by the ethnically-neutral English. The mother tongue policy has two main aspects: one of cultural policy and one of educational policy. The cultural policy is closely linked to the use of English as the main working language of the republic: being the dominant language in education, in politics, in public administration, and in the (white-collar) workplace, its spread was perceived to be a threat to the cultural heritage of the indigenous population, particularly because of its perceived association with potentially undesirable Western values. To counter this, English is presented, in public rhetoric, as being “dissociated from Western culture”, and by being “referred to as a global rather than a Western language” (Alsagoff 2010, 342). While the utilitarian value of English is highlighted – being, as it is, the international lingua franca so important for the economic development of the country – it is denied, officially, native speaker status (Wee 2003). This is where the mother tongues come in, which are “presented as repositories and mediums of ethnic culture and identity” (Alsagoff 2010, 342). The mother tongues are therefore deemed important, worthy of study, and as being in need of protection in the face of the potential shift towards English, given the elevated position of English in the country. Mother tongues are, as a result, taught at a high level in school, under a policy of bilingual education (Pakir 1991; Pakir 2001; Dixon 2005).

The mother tongue of the Indian community, in this system, is designated as Tamil. However, the Indians are in the unusual situation that, since the 1990s, members of their ethnic group have the option of choosing from one of six mother

2. See following paragraph for a definition of this term in the Singaporean context.

tongues: Tamil, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Panjabi, or Urdu. Thus, arguably, the Indians have more choice than the other ethnic groups in what language they learn at school – not a small concern, since the mother tongue results make up 25 percent of the year's mark (in primary school) and since one might well be at an advantage if the “second language” (after English, the medium of instruction) learned at school is also a language actually spoken at home. It should be noted, however, that the mother tongue–ethnicity pairing is not mandatory, and that pupils (i.e. their parents) can choose to enrol for any mother tongue (e.g. an Indian taking Chinese, or a Chinese taking Malay). That said, it would appear, based on the census data for literacy, that the predicted ethnic mother tongues are most usually chosen by pupils/parents – except in the case of the Indians: 79.9 percent of Chinese respondents claimed literacy in Chinese, 88.9 percent of Malays claimed literacy in Malay, whereas only 49.6 percent of Indians claimed literacy in Tamil.³ Among the Indians, too, literacy in non-official languages is highest at 19.6 percent (2.3 percent for the Chinese and 5.9 percent for the Malays), which is unsurprising, seeing as Tamil is the only official “Indian” language, whereas there were and are many other languages spoken in the community, both traditionally, and as a result of more recent immigration. Additionally, Mandarin and Malay are languages that play a certain role in the Indian community: Indian Muslims tend to be conversant to some extent in Malay for religious purposes (Malay ethnicity and Muslim religion are intimately connected in Singapore and Malaysia), and there is anecdotal evidence that Mandarin is being used informally as a tool for communication with the majority group, albeit in informal (e.g. school yard) settings.

Given the historical and contemporary linguistic background of Indians in Singapore, it is reasonable to assume that there are some differences to be expected between the English spoken by them and the other two major groups. Malay, and particularly Chinese languages are, after all, typologically rather different from Dravidian languages (e.g. Chinese/Malay SVO vs. Dravidian SOV, Chinese/Malay uninflected for tense vs. Dravidian tense inflection, isolating Chinese vs. agglutinative Dravidian/Malay). For it is indeed Dravidian languages that must have had an effect on a putative Indian Singapore English ethnic variety, particularly if the proportions given in Table 6.1 are indicative of a possible “founder effect” (Mufwene 1995).

3. These data from Wong (2011a) take into account the resident population over 15 years of age. They are presented, in the census release, in terms of combinations of languages, e.g. ‘Chinese only’, ‘English and Tamil only’, ‘English, Malay, and Tamil only’, etc. Combinations not taken into account here are ‘Non-official language only’, ‘Other two languages only’, ‘English and non-official language only’, and ‘Other three or more languages’.

4. Ethnic variation in Singapore English

Research on linguistic variation between ethnic groups in Singapore has been largely concerned with pronunciation differences at all phonetic levels (see e.g. Lim 1996; Tan 1999; Deterding & Poedjosoedarmo 2000; Lim 2000; Suzanna & Brown 2000; Huang 2003; Gut 2005; Deterding 2007; Tan 2012). Some (Gut 2005; Deterding 2007) are concerned with measurements of fine phonetic detail, while others (e.g. Lim 2000; Deterding & Poedjosoedarmo 2000; Tan 2012) are more interested in identification tasks: thus Lim (2000) reports that correct identification of the speaker's ethnicity correlates strongly with the level of formality in this speaker's language use (the more informal, the higher the correct identification). Further, Tan (2012) reports that informants in the 19–29 age range were less likely to correctly identify the ethnicity of recorded voices (what she calls “accent deafness”) as well as a tendency for ethnic accents to be misidentified as Chinese. She explains this by the dominance of the Chinese population in Singapore, making their variety the perceived “default Singaporean accent” (Tan 2012, 14). A certain amount of convergence towards Chinese Singapore English would certainly be unsurprising, given the majority status of its speakers.

As far as grammatical differences go, out of the wealth of research done on Singapore English grammar, there has been very limited research involving ethnic variation. Many substratist accounts are based on Chinese varieties. While some focus on Hokkien and Cantonese (the majority varieties in the initial contact period), others (e.g. Bao 2005; Bao & Lye 2005; Bao 2009) prefer to use Mandarin, arguing for considerable similarities between dialects of Chinese (a point of contention, see Siegel 2012). Previous research by Leimgruber (2009, 194) involving all three ethnic groups in comparable sizes has shown some statistically significant differences in the use of discourse particles: Indians used significantly fewer particles than the Chinese and the Malays in informal settings but overtook the Chinese in informal settings. Other grammatical features investigated in that study (aspect markers and existential constructions) were used similarly by all three groups. These results notwithstanding, grammatical differences between the varieties of the three main ethnic groups are rarely discussed; this paper is an attempt to contribute towards filling this gap.

5. Aspect in English, Sinitic, and Dravidian

Comrie (1976) posits that there are two main aspectual perspectives in all languages: the perfective and the imperfective. The perfective aspect focuses on a situation from the outside, as a single unanalysable whole, where there is no attempt

to view the individual phases of the situation. The perfective is thus often said to denote a “complete” situation with the beginning, middle, and end presented in their entirety. In English, the simple past tense form (in regular and irregular verbs) convey perfective aspect as well as the past tense meaning. Imperfectivity presents a situation as one that is ongoing and focuses on its inside without specifying its initial or final endpoints. While many languages have a single category to express imperfectivity, there are others that use grammatical means to only partially express the imperfective meaning, and some where the imperfective notion is subdivided into a number of distinct categories. Imperfective aspect includes both the habitual and the durative (or continuous) notions, where durativity encompasses both non-progressiveness and progressiveness (Comrie 1976, 24–25). Progressive aspect has connotations of dynamism and continuous successive changing phases. In English it is marked with an auxiliary and the inflection *-ing*. It follows, therefore, that the progressive marker does not generally combine well with stative verbs, which may be continuous but are non-dynamic. In English, the sentence *She was know-ing him well* is regarded as being ungrammatical, because the stative verb *know* is incompatible with the progressive *-ing* marker. However, Comrie (1976, 25) additionally puts forth the suggestion that the English *-ing* marker could be “a kind of imperfective” because it can occur in a wide range of imperfective constructions, even sometimes in stative contexts such as when a state is temporary, e.g. *I'm loving this flower motif*.

In this paper we investigate whether the progressive marker *-ing* is over-extended in Singapore English. We will be replicating Sharma's (2009) study, which examined imperfectivity in Indian English and in Singapore English. Sharma (2009) specified four different imperfective categories which may or may not licence the use of *-ing*, namely progressives, statives, delimited habituals, and non-delimited habituals. An example of each sentence type is provided in (1), with sentences marked for ungrammaticality in Standard English. We used these categories in our study as well and, like Sharma, we also included some perfective sentences, which were combined with *-ing*. Note that the imperfective sentences specified below were used in the questionnaire as part of our main study.

- (1) a. I'm writing a letter. [Progressive]
 b. *This bottle is containing one litre of juice. [Stative]
 c. I'm eating a lot these days. [Delimited habitual]
 d. *Ahmed is brushing every morning and evening. [Non-delimited habitual]
 e. *She was falling down suddenly. [Perfective]

In standard varieties of English, the progressive *-ing* marker is naturally acceptable with progressive sentences such as (1a), but it is also acceptable with

delimited habituals such as the sentence in (1c). A delimited habitual is a sub-type of habitual,⁴ which consists of an adverbial that temporally binds the situation specified, giving the sentence a temporary and episodic reading. Thus, it cannot be seen as stative and is compatible with the progressive *-ing* marker. The same cannot be seen in the other sub-category of habituals, i.e. non-delimited habituals such as (1d). A non-delimited habitual is not time bound by a temporal adverbial and, accordingly, the habitual situation specified occurs repeatedly without there being a specified end point. It therefore has a stative interpretation. It has a similar reading to sentence (1b), which is unambiguously a stative sentence, where its stative predicate is not dynamic and thus incompatible with the *-ing* marker. Therefore, it cannot be combined felicitously with the progressive *-ing* marker in Standard English. Sentence (1e) consists of a perfective predicate, which is bound by the punctual time adverbial *suddenly*. This gives the sentence a non-continuous interpretation and therefore is incompatible with the progressive *-ing*. Thus, to summarise, of the four imperfective categories and the one perfective category, only the progressive and the delimited habitual environments licence the use of the progressive *-ing* marker in standard, metropolitan varieties of English.⁵

Table 6.3 shows how the above mentioned imperfective and perfective sentences are expressed in Singapore's main substrate languages, i.e. Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien, Malay and Tamil.

Given the success of the Speak Mandarin Campaign (SMC) and other forms of institutional promotion of the language since the 1980s, Mandarin has, in the last 30 years, been replacing many of the other Chinese languages such as Hokkien, Cantonese, Teochew, etc. This makes Mandarin the most relevant Chinese substrate language influencing Singapore English presently, which is why we have chosen it as the representative Chinese substrate in our current study. It is important, however, to distinguish between the Mandarin spoken in Mainland China and the Mandarin spoken in Singapore, as "the Singaporean variety of Mandarin, like Malay, has been affected by contact with other Chinese languages in Singapore" (Sharma 2009, 175–176).

4. Interestingly, while English does have a separate 'habitual' aspect, it marks it only in the past tense, i.e. *'John used to work here'* (Comrie 1976, 25).

5. There is some indication that these textbook rules on the use of the progressive may be crumbling. Hundt and Vogel (2011), for instance, observe that progressives can mark perfect meanings in some ENL varieties. Pfaff et al. (2013) further note the 'new' function of the past progressive to mark recentness (as in *I was just reading this article*).

Table 6.3 Singapore's main substrate languages expressing imperfective and perfective categories

	Imperfective		Perfective		
	Progressive	Stative	Delimited habitual	Non-del. Habitual	
English	I'm writing (PROG) a letter.	This bottle *['is containing] (PROG)/ contains juice.	I'm eating (PROG) a lot these days.	He *['is brushing] (PROG)/ brushes his teeth every morning.	She *['was falling] (PROG)/fell down suddenly.
Mandarin	Wǒ zài (PROG) xiě yìfēng xìn.	Zhè píng (*zài) (PROG) hán yóu guǒzhī.	Wǒ zài jīn (*zài) (PROG) chī le hěn duō.	Tā (*zài) (PROG) mǎi tiān zǎoshàng shuā yá.	Tā (*zài) (PROG) tú rán jiàn dié dǎo.
Cantonese	Ngo5 se2-gan2 (PROG) soen3.	Nil zeonlseo12 zong1zyu6 (*gan2) gwo2zap1.	Ngo5 ni1 paai4 sik6 (*gan2) hou2do1 je5.	Koei5 mui5 ziu1z dou1 caat3 (*gan2) ngaa4.	Koei5 mou4dyun1 dyun1 dit3dou2 (*gan2).
Hokkien	Góa ló (PROG) siá sìn.	Chit-ê (*lō) chun ũ chiap.	Góa chit lêng-kang (*lō) chiah chia ⁿ -chōe.	I tak chá-khí (*lō) lù chhui-khí.	I tōng-thut-kan (*lō) pòah-tó.
Malay	Saya sedang (PROG) menulis surat.	Botol ini (*sedang) (PROG) mengandungi jus.	Saya *['sedang] (PROG) memakan]/makan banyak beberapa hari ini.	Dia *['sedang] (PROG) memberi]/berus giginya setiap pagi.	Dia *['sedang] (PROG) jatuh]/terjatuh tiba-tiba.
Tamil	Naan kadithahai ezruthi-kondiru-(IMPF)-kkiren.	Intha kuppi pazrarasam-kondiru-(IMPF)-kkirathu.	Naan ippo thellam niraiya saappittu-kondiru-(IMPF)-kkiren.	Avan thinanum kaalaiyil pal theythu-kondiru-(IMPF)-kkiraan.	Aval thidirendru vizrunthu-*kondiru (IMPF)-nthaal.

Gloss: Imperfective: IMPF; Progressive: PROG.

5.1 A brief description of the various imperfective systems of Singapore's main substrate/adstrate languages

Chinese: Progressive aspect in Mandarin is expressed by the marker *zài*, which can only be used in dynamic, continuous contexts. Mandarin also possesses an imperfective marker *-zhe*, which has a relatively restricted use within certain imperfective contexts. It is primarily used to mark temporary result states (Sun 2006) and is actually not used in many imperfective constructions such as habituals, simultaneity, and persistence. There is also extensive optionality in the use of *-zhe* as it is conditioned by prosodic, semantic, and word order factors. In many cases, it is omitted altogether. Convergence across the various Chinese substrates seems to reinforce the lack of pressure to mark imperfectivity using *-zhe* (Sharma 2009, 187; Ansaldo 2004).

In Cantonese the progressive aspect is marked with a verbal suffix *-gan2*; there is also a continuous marker *-zyu3*, similar to Mandarin *-zhe*. Like Mandarin *zài*, *-gan2* appears not to be licenced for non-progressive imperfectives. The same can be said for Hokkien, where the preverbal marker *ló* expresses the progressive aspect, but no other imperfectives (Chappell 1992).

Malay: The progressive aspectual perspective is marked with the form *sedang* in standard Malay. The form *sedang* is used in fairly restricted contexts and cannot be used to express future reference or simultaneity. This Malay progressive marker operates very differently from the English progressive *-ing* in that it cannot occur in a wide range of imperfective contexts like *-ing* does. Another form that can also be analysed as a progressive marker is the prefix *meN-* (Soh & Nomoto 2009, 148). This marker, like *sedang*, is incompatible with stative verbs, indicating that in Malay there is no special motivation to mark imperfectivity in all contexts (Svalberg & Chuchu 1998).

Tamil: Tamil belongs to the southern branch of the Dravidian language family. Its morphology is agglutinating. Tense is obligatorily marked using overt suffixes whereas aspect is optionally marked using auxiliaries. In (2) we see the use of the finite form of a verb predicate that consists of an aspectual auxiliary and a tense suffix.

- (2) Verb stem + Aspect + Tense + Person Number Gender (PNG)

The imperfective perspective in Tamil is expressed using the almost fully grammaticalised⁶ *-kondiru* marker. Note that *-kondiru* is an imperfective marker,

6. Aspect markers in Tamil are each in various stages of grammaticalisation. The ones that are fully grammaticalised are primarily aspectual, whereas those that are in the early stages of grammaticalisation mainly express attitude. Since aspect is a category that is still in the process

rather than a progressive marker. It therefore combines with all verb type categories, either expressing continuity with statives or progressive aspect with dynamic verb types (Annamalai 1997, 57).

5.2 Motivations for our present study

In this paper we investigate whether the progressive marker *-ing* is over-extended in Singapore English, distinguishing between the three main Singapore English varieties, namely the Chinese, Malay, and Tamil varieties. We will be replicating Sharma's (2009) study, which examined imperfectivity in Indian English and in Singapore English.

Kortmann and Szmrecsanyi (2004) observe that over-extension of the progressive is found in bilingual postcolonial varieties. Sharma (2009) finds that its occurrence in Indian English is extremely frequent. In all the four imperfective categories, i.e. progressives, delimited habituals, statives, and non-delimited habituals, for instance, she found a robust over-extension of *-ing* to non-delimited habituals and statives. Figure 6.1 illustrates this clearly.

Sharma (2009) also investigated the use of the progressive *-ing* in Singapore English and concluded that while there is some evidence of the over-extension of *-ing*, it is nowhere near the extent to which it occurs in Indian English. Ho and Platt (1993, 189), in fact, claim that "in general, the state-process distinction holds for Singaporean Chinese learners of English". Sharma (2009) uses a substratist

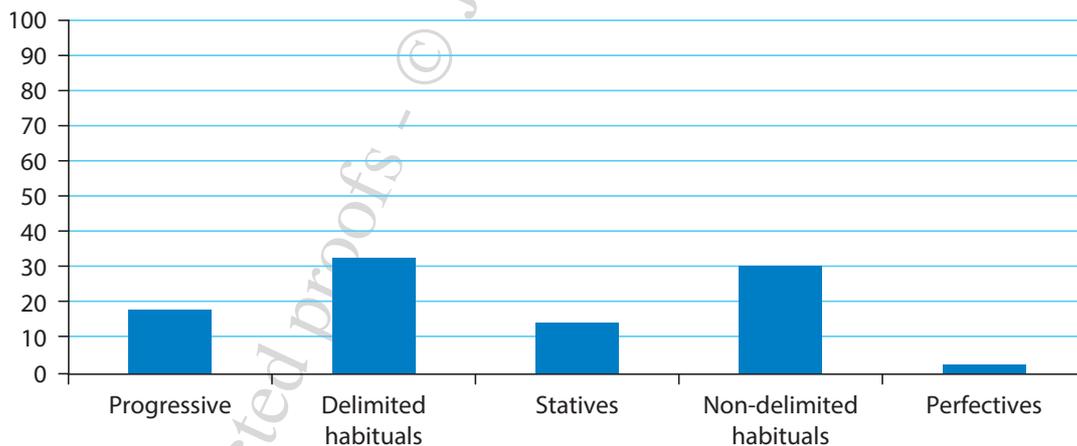


Figure 6.1 Percentage of the use of the progressive *-ing* in Indian English

of grammaticalisation, there is considerable variability in its usage across dialects and idiolects (Schiffman 1999, 81, 104).

explanation to justify this difference between the use of *-ing* in Indian English and in Singapore English. She argues that Chinese systems account for the few instances of the over-extension of the progressive in Singapore English whereas Hindi, the primary language spoken by her Indian subjects, obligatorily marks the imperfective. Indian English speakers, therefore, seem to be “recasting *-ing* as a general imperfective marker” (Sharma 2009, 183).

In this chapter, we investigate the use of the progressive *-ing* marker in Singapore English in more depth. The socio-historical summary given in Sections 1–3 raises several possibilities. Firstly, it is likely that the Indian ethnic group features a variety of English different from the other groups: Indian teachers were instrumental in the early education system, and presently exhibit the highest level of English use as a home language; a faster shift to English in the community (accompanied with more education-induced standardization) is to be expected. Secondly, it is, conversely, possible that differences between ethnic groups are less than obvious, given the numerical predominance of the Chinese population and the absence of segregationist measures (in fact, the presence of integrationist policies plays a significant role); convergence is thus not to be excluded in what remains, after all, a rather small national speech community.

Nonetheless, we stipulate there being at least three varieties of Singapore English, distinguishing between the varieties spoken by the Mandarin speaking Chinese, the Malays, and the Tamils. We explore whether there are differences in the progressive *-ing* marker used by the Chinese, Malays, and Tamils in Singapore English and verify whether a substratist explanation can account for any differences if they exist. Specifically, we investigate (a) whether the progressive is over-extended in all varieties of Singapore English to the same extent and (b) whether the substrate languages, i.e. Singapore Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil can account for any of the differences, if they do exist.

6. Methodology

The present study draws on data collected from the three main ethnic groups via administration of an online questionnaire. The subjects ranged from ages 16 years to 30 years.⁷ This age group was chosen because of the Speak Mandarin Campaign (SMC), launched in 1979, which would have unanimously affected the Chinese participants in this study. We thus involved only a younger generation of Singaporeans to be assured that all the Chinese subjects’ variety of Singapore English

7. Only one subject was 40 years old and she was Tamil.

would be affected mainly/solely by Singapore Mandarin, given that we are testing whether there is a substrate influence on the participants' use of the progressive *-ing*. We were thus selective in terms of our age group because it was important that all the ethnic groups in our study had the same mother tongue language experience at school.

Only Mandarin speaking Chinese have been chosen to represent the Singapore ethnic Chinese for this study, not only because of the effects of the SMC (which led to Mandarin becoming the dialect spoken by the newer generation of Chinese Singaporeans), but also because it is one of Singapore's official languages and features prominently in the education system. The group chosen for the study would thus be representative of the younger Chinese Singaporeans who study/studied Mandarin at school and who speak it at home with their families. The Malay subjects participating in this study all study/studied Malay at school and also speak it at home. The Tamil Singaporeans represent the Indian subjects in this study. The socio-cultural history outlined in the previous sections makes a strong argument for Dravidian languages having had the most profound influence on a putative Indian Singapore English ethnic variety. For ease of comparison, we have chosen the Tamil ethnic group to represent the Indians because their mother tongue Tamil, besides being one of the official languages in Singapore, is also one of the oldest members of the Dravidian language family in Singapore. Tamil can therefore be reasonably expected to represent the other Dravidian languages that may have had a strong influence on the Indian Singapore English variety. The Tamil speaking subjects in this study all learn/learned Tamil at school and also sometimes speak it at home. This group is ideally positioned to compare against the Hindi speaking Indian subjects in Sharma's (2009) study in order to investigate the substratist explanation in more detail.

There were 32 subjects from each ethnic group. An almost equal number of males and females from each group participated, reducing the possibility of gender bias. All subjects were asked what mother tongue they learnt at school and what language they spoke most of the time at home. Based on their answers, they were placed in one of the three main ethnic groups, i.e. Chinese, Malay, or Tamil. Note that all subjects were either students or working adults who spoke English as an L1.

The questionnaire comprised of four different types of imperfective sentences, i.e. progressives, statives, delimited habituals, and non-delimited habituals as well perfective sentences, which were all combined with the *-ing* marker (see (1) in Section 5 for more detail).

The subjects were given five sentences from each imperfective category, three perfective sentences as well as a few filler sentences. The online survey system automatically mixed them into a random order. The subjects' task was to mark

a given sentence as being either “correct” or “incorrect”. If they marked a sentence as being “incorrect”, they were asked to provide what they felt was a correct version of the sentence. They were also asked whether the given sentence in the questionnaire was one that they would use in their everyday speech. The subjects were told that there were no right or wrong answers and that the questionnaire was employed to elicit people’s opinions, not to test their English language ability. There was evidence that the subjects corrected sentences based on their everyday language use and not on the perceived norms of correctness. One example of this is when given the sentence, ‘My knee is paining’, one of the informants wrote ‘My knee is pain’ as the alternative. Note that if a subject marked a given sentence as being incorrect, but then provided an alternative sentence of the same aspectual construction as the given sentence, it was coded as being correct. Also, if the subject marked the given sentence as being incorrect but then claimed that he would still use it in his speech, it was coded as being correct.

7. Results

The results, summarised in Figure 6.2, indicate that all three ethnic groups find progressive predicates combined with the *-ing* marker acceptable almost 100 percent of the time. More than 50 percent of the time, they also mark delimited habituals combined with *-ing* as being correct, with no significant difference amongst the three ethnic groups (χ^2 -test, 4 d.f., $p > 0.25$ for all combinations). With regards to non-delimited habituals, however, the Chinese and Malays find them acceptable with *-ing* only 15 percent and 18 percent of the time, respectively. The Tamils, on the other hand, find them acceptable 26 percent of the time. Here the difference is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) between the Tamils on the one hand and the Chinese and Malays on the other (the difference between the latter two groups being non-significant at $p > 0.125$). In the case of statives, the percentage of acceptability is even lower. The Chinese and Malays find statives with *-ing* acceptable at a rate of only 7 percent and 8 percent, respectively, while the Tamils find them acceptable 15 percent of the time. This difference in the acceptance rates of *-ing* with statives, between the Chinese and Malays versus the Tamils is, again, statistically significant ($p < 0.025$), whereas it is not significant between the Chinese and the Malays ($p > 0.124$).

The percentage of perfective predicates found acceptable with *-ing* is low amongst all three ethnic groups, which is to be expected. This is because the perfective sentences in the questionnaire consisted of punctual verbs (e.g. *fall*) modified by punctual adverbs (e.g. *suddenly*), which created an environment that did not licence the use of the progressive *-ing* marker in either Standard English or

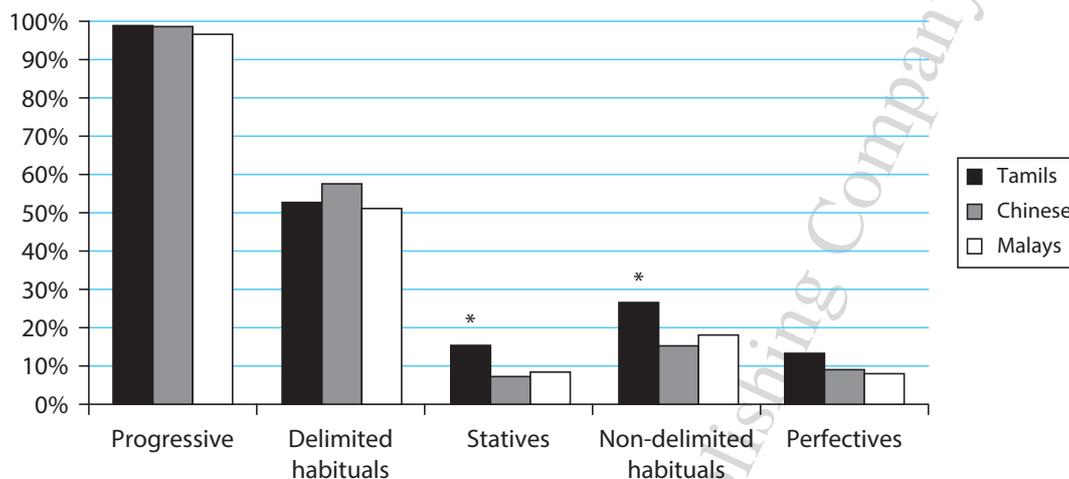


Figure 6.2 Percentage of sentences scored as being correct by the three ethnic groups

basilectal ethnic varieties of SgE. Thus the verbs in the given perfective sentences are only compatible with a perfective aspectual marker and not a progressive one. Interestingly, the results show that even with regard to these perfective sentences, among the three ethnic groups, the Tamils show the highest rate of acceptance of the *-ing* progressive marker. The Tamils mark perfectives combined with *-ing* as being correct 13 percent of the time as opposed to the Chinese and Malays who mark them as being correct only 9 percent and 8 percent of the time respectively. However, these differences are not significant ($p > 0.09$ in all cases).

To summarise, with regard to the predicates that are not acceptable with *-ing* in standard metropolitan varieties of English, namely statives, non-delimited habituais, and perfectives, Tamils show a significantly higher acceptability rate when compared to the Chinese and Malays. Their acceptance of *-ing* with progressive predicates is also one of the highest in comparison with the other ethnic groups.

Interestingly, the rate of the Tamils' acceptability of *-ing* with delimited habituais is low in comparison with the Chinese and almost on a par with the Malays. This is unusual given that the Tamil group consistently outperforms the other two ethnic groups with regard to the acceptability rate of *-ing* with all the other sentence type categories. We would, in fact, expect the Tamil group to rate the acceptability of *-ing* with delimited habituais very high, higher than even the Chinese group, especially since in Standard English, delimited habituais are acceptable with the progressive *-ing* marker. This discrepancy in the results will be addressed in the next section.

8. Discussion

This study is closely modelled on Sharma's (2009) corpus-based study of the over-extension of the progressive *-ing* marker in imperfective and perfective contexts. Sharma looked at this phenomenon in Indian English and in Singapore English, looking at substrate influences from Hindi and Singapore Mandarin to account for her results. She found that in the Singapore component of the International Corpus of English (ICE-Sing), there is a very slight over-extension of *-ing*, which is nowhere near the extent to which *-ing* is over-extended in Indian English (based on ICE-India).

In our study we first propose that there is no single variety of Singapore English and that there are differences in the varieties spoken by the Chinese, Malays, and Tamils, at least in their use of the progressive *-ing* marker. We look at Singapore Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil as being the three main substrate languages that could influence the use of *-ing* in Singapore English and suggest that the grammatical differences in these languages account for the differences in our results.

Like Sharma's (2009) study, our results show that there is indeed evidence of over-extension of the progressive *-ing* marker in all varieties of Singapore English. Our results, however, highlight that the Tamil group shows a significantly higher rate of *-ing* over-extension when compared to the Chinese and Malay groups. This is not surprising if we compare the Singapore Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil aspectual systems, which we claim influence the different varieties of Singapore English, as spoken by the three ethnic groups.

To recall, in Singapore Mandarin the progressive marker *zài* is only used in strictly progressive contexts, while the imperfective marker *-zhe* has a highly variable usage and is in many cases omitted in stative and in many other imperfective contexts. Malay's progressive markers, *sedang* and *meN-*, like *zài* in Mandarin, can only be used in strictly progressive contexts. Note that Malay does not even possess an imperfective marker that can be used in stative contexts. An examination of the Chinese and Malay results suggests, therefore, that both the Chinese and Malay imperfective systems reduce the pressure to mark imperfectivity overtly in the Singapore English spoken by the Chinese and Malays, respectively, in non-progressive contexts. There is a very slight over-extension of the *-ing* marker evidenced in the Chinese and Malay groups, but it is not as pronounced as the over-extension of the *-ing* marker evidenced in the Tamil group.

The substratist explanation proposed by Sharma (2009) for differences between Indic- and Sinitic-influenced English varieties seems, on the surface, to also account for the Tamil's higher rate of acceptance of *-ing* across all the imperfective categories. The Tamil results suggest that the *-ing* marker is possibly a relexified form of the Tamil imperfective marker *kondiru*. This is particularly plausible if we

bear in mind that Tamil uses the same marker, *kondiru*, to denote imperfectivity and it is acceptable with all verb types including progressives and statives.

But while we can trace effects from the Tamil substrate in our study, we find that the overall robustness of the pattern of the over-extension of the *-ing* marker is much higher in Sharma's (2009) study of Indian English (where Hindi is the substrate language in question) when compared to our study of Singapore English, in which Tamil is the substrate language in question. Sharma (2009, 185) states that "Hindi is a strict imperfectivity-marking system, such that all finite clauses must be marked as either perfective or imperfective". Hindi has an imperfective form (non progressive and/or habitual) *-ta*, which is never optional in habitual and stative contexts as well as a progressive form *rahna*, which performs a much stricter function than the broad scope of the English *-ing*. Sharma suggests that "due to its extended range, the form *-ing* appears to equally map to *rahna* and *-ta* and Indian English speakers interpret it as a global imperfectivity marker" (Sharma 2009, 185).

One of the reasons why the substrate effects in our Tamil Singapore English sample are much slighter than what is observed in Sharma's Indian English sample may be due to the differences between the aspectual systems of Tamil and Hindi. Unlike Hindi, where aspect is marked obligatorily, in Tamil it is often not explicitly marked due to pragmatic considerations that are related to politeness, shared perceptions, or the nature of truth propositions etc. (Schiffman 1999, 103). Thus, *-kondiru* does not necessarily occur in imperfective contexts in Tamil even though it is licensed to do so. In many instances where the imperfective is not overtly marked in Tamil, the verb is neutral where aspect is concerned. In some cases, the tense marker or a temporal adverbial in the sentence may convey an aspectual perspective rather than an overt aspectual marker itself.

To return to the case of delimited habituals, which were presented with overt time-bound adverbials in the questionnaire, the results show that Tamils are surprisingly less likely than the Chinese to accept the putative imperfective marker *-ing*. This is the only context where the Tamils do not over-extend the *-ing* marker more than the Chinese and Malays. This result, however, could be explained by the fact that the time-bound adverbials used in the delimited habitual sentences dissuaded the Tamils from using an overt aspectual marker. Recall that in Tamil, aspect marking is optional and tense marking is obligatory. Our substrate account would therefore posit that the temporal adverbial and tense marker already present in the delimited habitual constructions conveyed the imperfective aspectual perspective, without the need for the Tamils to include the *-ing* marker. The higher (though statistically insignificant, $p > 0.25$ in all cases) acceptance rate of *-ing* with delimited habituals by the Chinese, observed in Figure 6.1, could, likewise,

be a result of the function of the Chinese progressive marker *zài* in marking delimited habituals in that language (Yang & Bateman 2002).

To summarise, our study highlights the fact that even within Singapore English varieties, there can be significant differences in how *-ing* is over-extended. The results of our short survey show that there is a significant difference in the grammaticality judgments of statives and non-delimited habituals marked with *-ing* between Tamil respondents on the one hand, and Chinese and Malay respondents on the other. For other imperfectives, however, the difference between the three groups did not prove to be significant. The explanation we offer to account for the differences in ethnic varieties with respect to the *-ing* marking of statives and non-delimited habituals draws on the grammatical means used in the substrate languages involved: the Tamil marker *kondiru* is used to mark all imperfectives, whereas the Chinese marker 在 *zài* and the Malay markers *meN-* and *sedang* are progressive markers that are restricted to “the typical ‘action-in-progress’ meaning” (Li & Shirai 2000, 24). The progressive markers in Chinese and Malay, in other words, cannot be used with stative (Soh & Nomoto 2009) or punctual/telic predicates which accounts for the low acceptance rate of *-ing* with statives, non-delimited habituals, and even perfectives by the Chinese and Malay subjects. The progressive markers in Chinese and Malay, however, can be combined with delimited habituals (Li & Shirai 2000, 211), which is one of the ways to account for the observation that *-ing* marking has high acceptance rates with delimited habituals in all three groups. However, since delimited habituals are also possible in ENL varieties, it is not necessary to fall back on an explanation involving substrate influence in this particular instance. Our study nonetheless shows that there is a significant difference between Tamils and non-Tamils, i.e. Chinese and Malays, where the latter much more clearly reject the inflection on statives and non-delimited habituals, following the model of standard varieties of native English. Thus, the progress/movement/tendency towards a unified, pan-ethnic Singapore English, while clearly underway, is by no means complete: even though the findings by Tan (2012), for instance, suggest that accent distinctions are eroding, we show that subtle and perhaps fairly stable (and certainly statistically significant) differences among groups can be identified with close analysis.

We have also drawn comparisons with Sharma’s (2009) results and have highlighted the fact that, despite the parallels, our results show that the Tamils’ over-extension of *-ing* in Singapore English is not at all at the same scale as Hindi speakers’ over-extension of *-ing* in Indian English. The results therefore indicate an important difference between Tamil speakers’ Singapore English and Hindi speakers’ Indian English; in Indian English *-ing* is extended to all imperfective aspectual constructions, whereas this is not the case in Tamil speakers’ Singapore

English. We have accounted for this by illustrating the aspectual differences in the respective substrate languages.⁸

In conclusion, it would appear that the aspectual systems of the various substrate languages, at least with respect to the categories explored here, show some evidence of ethnic differences in the grammar of Singapore English, differences which, thus far, have not been noted in the literature (with the possible exception of different rates of copula-deletion, see Sharma & Rickford 2009). We explain this difference by proposing that the grammatical systems of the substrate languages of the informant groups have a direct influence on the resulting varieties of Singapore English. Therefore, accounts that draw on a single substrate language (such as Bao 2005) need to be rethought as providing evidence only for a subset of speakers of Singapore English, namely that associated with said substrate language.

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8. Note that the two studies in question made use of different methodologies. Sharma's (2009) study drew examples from corpus data whereas the present study made use of acceptability ratings collected through a survey.

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