Variation in Singapore English as reflected in aspectual constructions[*]

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This paper reports ongoing research into Singapore English, an outer-circle English (Kachru 1985) with endogenous contact ecology (Bao 2005). The variety has been analysed as a continuum (Platt 1975; Ho & Platt 1993), reminiscent of post-creole ones (DeCamp 1971); more recently, the idea of a diglossic speech community (Gupta 1994; 1998; 2001) was put forward. In this latter analysis, Standard Singapore English is H(igh), and Colloquial Singapore English, often called 'Singlish', is L(ow).

The current study involves a sample of 36 students from three different socioeconomic backgrounds. Interviews in four distinct situational settings are used to select one of the two competing models. Variables include aspect markers (Bao 1995; 2005), existential *got*, and discourse particles (Gupta 1992; 1994).

1 INTRODUCTION

Research into Singapore English is ample, and has focused on various aspects of the variety. One recurrent issue is that of the sociolinguistic typological models proposed to explain the variation inherent in Singapore English (henceforth SgE): early on, Platt (1975) applied DeCamp's (1971) post-creole continuum to Singapore, arguing for a continuum of indiscrete sociolects. Gupta (1994; 1998; 2001), however, used the concept of diglossia (Ferguson 1959), positing the existence of two sub-varieties, Standard Singapore English (SSE) and Colloquial Singapore English (CSE), distributed functionally. Other models proposed since then (Pakir 1991; Poedjosoedarmo 1995) have tended to favour the first of these two approaches. This paper tries to clarify the issue, taking into consideration recent findings from fieldwork carried out in the city-state.

2 RESEARCH QUESTION

From what precedes, the research question tackled in this paper can be phrased in the following way: is the variation inherent in SgE one that reflects a continuum of sub-varieties, or one typical of a diglossic speech community? The data collected from fieldwork are expected to shed some light on this issue.

3 METHODOLOGY & VARIABLES

3.1 Methodology

A total of 36 informants are being interviewed for the purposes of the present study. They are drawn in equal numbers from three post-secondary institutions, which vary in terms of entry

requirements, and represent the post-secondary options chosen by the majority of the population (83.8%, Ministry of Education 2006). In each institution, four students were selected from each of the three majority ethnic groups – Chinese, Malay, and Indian – thereby ensuring equal representation of ethnicity (12 students from each race) and educational background (12 students from each school type). Table 1 below represents this graphically.

	Chinese	Malay	Indian
Junior College	4	4	4
Polytechnic	4	4	4
Vocational training	4	4	4

Table 1

Distribution of informants by ethnicity and school type

Students from the first two schools (a polytechnic and a vocational training college) were interviewed in October-November 2006, while the last one (a Junior College) will be done in early August 2007. The three school types are taken to represent three socio-economic classes: as yet unpublished research by the National Institute of Education (p.c. Bockhorst-Heng) has found a close correlation between primary school pupils' socio-economic background and their achievements in school. While it is problematic to extend this to the post-secondary level, the relatively wide range of available options would reflect, if not academic achievement (through entrance requirements), then at least ambition, i.e. an act of identity[1].

The informants were interviewed in ethnically homogeneous groups of four, resulting in nine groups (the nine cells in Table 1). A series of four recordings was then carried out: firstly, an individual interview with each of the informants, secondly, a dialogue interview, thirdly, a task-based group recording without the researcher, and lastly, a radio-microphone recording of casual conversation in a recreational area, typically the school canteen. This is illustrated in Table 2:

Type	Number per group	Approx. duration per recording
Individual interview	4	15 min
Dialogue interview	2	15 min
Group recording	1	15 min
Radio-microphone recording	1	15 min

Table 2

Structure of the recordings

In the course of the two hours that were spent with each group, formality was expected to decrease significantly: the settings were designed to enable a smooth transition from interviewer-led interaction, via structured conversations, to more relaxed types of speech.

The interviews were recorded on mini-disc and transcribed in .txt files, which were then analysed with WordSmith Tools. At the time of writing, this amounts to 12 hours of recording time and a corpus of 74,000 words, and is expected to grow to about 18 hours (110,000 words) once the last third is completed.

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[1] For example, a student in Junior College will be aiming higher than one in vocational training. With this choice comes a need to identify as part of the Junior College community: one way of doing this involves language.

3.2 Variables

3.2.1 Aspect markers

The title of this paper introduces the main variable of this study, aspect markers. In SgE, the aspect system can be analysed (Bao 2005) as having been transferred from the major substrate language, Chinese, into the emerging variety, where it was relexified by the superstrate English. Typically, they take the form of English adverbs, and mark a Chinese-type aspect. Table 3 below is from Bao (2005).

		Chinese	SgE	English
(a)	Perfective			
	(i) Completive	V *le*	S *already*	V-*ed*, V-*en*
			V already	
	(ii) Experiential	V *guo*	*ever* V	≈ *ever* V-*en*
	(iii) Emphatic	*yǒu* V	*got* V	-
		V- *wán*	V *finish*	-
(b)	Inchoative	S *le*	S *already*	-
(c)	Inceptive	S *le*	S *already*	-
(d)	Imperfective			
	(i) Dynamic	*zài* V	V-*ing*	V-*ing*
	(ii) Stative	V *zhe*… (*ne*)	≈ V-*ing*	≈ V-*ing*
	(iii) Stative	V-*zhe* V	-	-
(e)	Tentative	V-V	-	-

Table 3

Aspect system in Chinese, SgE and English

While the analysis in Table 3 omits complex Chinese aspectual categories (as described in Xiao and McEnery 2004), it provides a helpful working tool with which to start. For the current study, the following were retained: completive, experiential, delimitative ('tentative' in Table 3), and inchoative (Bao 2005), as well as progressive and habitual (Alsagoff and Ho 1998). These variables have a number of possible variants, each of which can be classified as being either acrolectal/SSE or basilectal/CSE, as illustrated in Table 4.

The interview was designed so as to elicit as many tokens of these variables as possible. For instance, participants were asked to describe a typical day, in the hope that habitual constructions would be used. Similarly, discussions about holiday destinations were conducted with the experiential aspect in mind.

Variable	CSE variants	SSE variants
1) Completive	*already* *finish/got*	perfect
2) Experiential	*ever*	before, periphrastic
3) Delimitative	V-reduplication	Ø or periphrastic
4) Inchoative	*already*	Ø or periphrastic
5) Progressive	(BE) *still* V-*ing* Ø V-*ing*	BE V-*ing* BE *still* V-*ing*
6) Habitual	*always*	*used to* V/*would* V Simple present/periphrastic

Table 4

Aspectual variables under investigation

3.2.2 Discourse particles

The second set of variables that this study focuses on is discourse particles. They refer to a number of clause-final particles, described in detail by Gupta (1992) and Wee (2004), among others. They fulfil a variety of different pragmatic roles, but can be treated as a single variable for purposes of diglossic identification. The particles under investigation include, in ascending order of assertiveness (Gupta 1992), *ah/hah* (tentative), *hor* (request for support), *lor* (indicating obviousness), *lah* (assertive), *leh* (tentative suggestion), *meh* (marks scepticism), *what* (contradictory), *mah* (indicates an obvious contradiction). (1) below exemplifies the use of two of these.

(1)   Because she wants to sing mah. So she want to use, she want to join to sing, so we just groom her lor.
        (ii.C.4.m)[2]

3.2.3 Existential constructions

By existential constructions I mean sentences of the type exemplified in (2a), which can be rendered, in CSE, by deleting the expletive subject and using *got*, as in (2b). Also included in this category are locative utterances (see (3)), which use the same *got*.

(2)   (a)   There is a problem with this device.
        (b)   Got problem with this device.

(3)   I think got waterfall what. You will get to watch waterfall if you go hiking.
        'I thought there was a waterfall there. You can see it if you go hiking.'
        (iii.C.gr)

Therefore, the variants used are threefold: firstly, the SSE constructions of the type in (2a), consisting of *there* + BE, can be of an existential or a locative nature. The second category encompasses CSE constructions (both existential and locative) with *got*, where both the expletive and the copula are missing. A third, 'mixed' category can also occur, with *there* + *got*, as in (4) below, where 2's turn is a confirmation of 3's. This happens only in locative constructions (with *there* performing deixis and substitutable, if appropriate, with *here*). Rather than outright copula-deletion, as it often occurs in SgE (Ho & Platt 1993: 30-69), the copula here is replaced with *got* – in fact, a sentence like (5a) would be ungrammatical. On the other hand, (5b) would be acceptable, but it would become existential, rather than locative.

(4)   3: I think is better if you go East Coast, I don't want Changi.
        2: There got ghost ah.
        (iii.I.gr)

(5)   (a) *There is got ghost ah.
        (b) Got ghost ah.

Table 5 below gives a summary of these variants, with an indication of how their occurrence will be interpreted in the diglossic framework. Of the five variants, two are indicative of SSE, and three mark the CSE sub-variety.

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[2] Informant identification. ii = school type, C = ethnicity, 4 = number within group, m = sex. In other examples, gr = group recording, rm = radio-microphone recording.

Construction	SSE	CSE
a) Existential		
i. *there* + BE	×	
ii. *got*		×
b) Locative		
i. *there* + BE	×	
ii. *got*		×
iii. *there* + *got*		×

Table 5

Classification of the (got) variable's variants

4 RESULTS

Preliminary results from the available two thirds of the sample show the following trends: aspect markers have yielded too few tokens to be statistically significant, discourse particles seem to suggest the existence of two sub-varieties, and the (got) variable supports the diglossia hypothesis even more strongly.

4.1 Aspect markers

For the completive, *already* occurred 22 times, *finish* only once, and *got* never. Experiential *ever* was observed twice, as well as 32 instances of inchoative *already*. Verbal reduplication occurred in 13 cases, few of which could be given a tentative reading, and the habitual *always* construction occurred three times.

In a corpus of 73,820 words, these figures cannot be taken to represent much. Except perhaps for *already*, which had a rate of occurrence of 0.73‰, all variables were used disappointingly sparingly. Although the common trend is for L variants to peak, in all cases, in the group setting, numbers are too low to be significant in any sense.

4.2 Discourse particles

As far as discourse particles are concerned, many more tokens were observed. In total, 983 discourse particles were used, *ah* (621) and *lah* (270) accounting for over 90%. This equals to 13.32‰ of the total corpus. The distribution across situational settings shows a sharp divide between settings in which the interviewer is present (individual and dialogue interviews) and those in which he is not (group and radio-microphone recordings): the two 'formal' settings scored 9.26‰ and 9.25‰ respectively, and the two 'informal' ones 21.95‰ and 23.98‰, as illustrated in Figure 1.
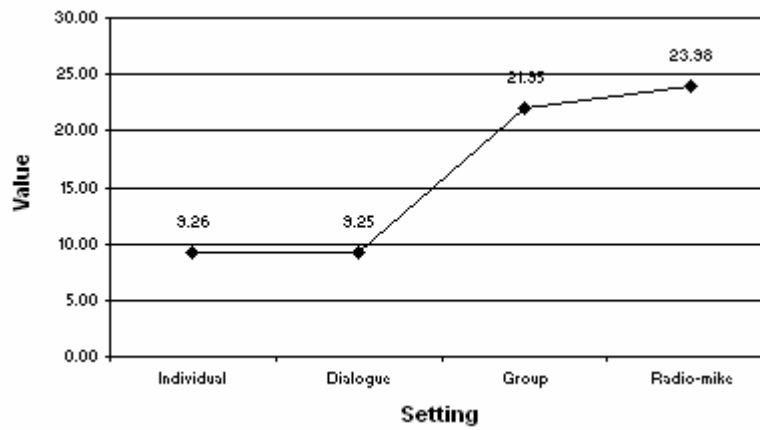
Figure 1

Discourse particles per 1,000 words, distributed across interview settings

4.3 Existential constructions

212 constructions were observed in the available data, and 55 of these used the CSE variant. In terms of distribution (see Figure 2), there was a slight increase from the first to the second setting (+1.01 percentage points), a large gap between the second and the third (+40.81), and a decrease between the third and the last (−11.74).

The gap between the settings Dialogue and Group reflect that observed with the discourse particles. The decrease within the two informal settings, however, will need further investigation.
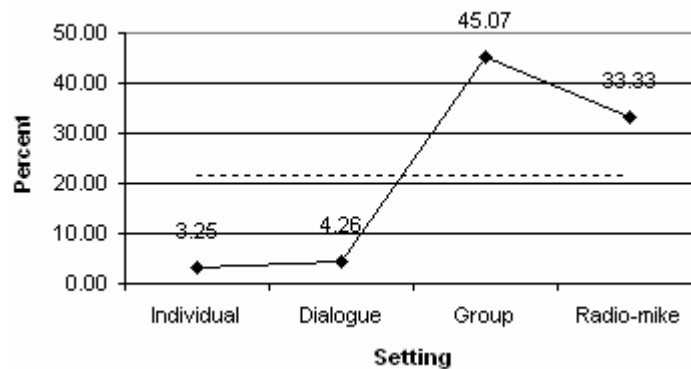

Figure 2

CSE variants of the (got) variable

5 Conclusions

Results available to date seem to point, overall, towards the diglossia hypothesis. While aspectual variables are inconclusive for lack of data, both discourse particles and existential constructions show a clear break in occurrence rates between two sets of situational settings: in the individual interviews as well as the dialogue ones, usage of basilectal/L variants were encouragingly homogeneous and relatively low, while in the group and radio-microphone recordings, the same variants were, although more heterogeneously so, used at a much higher rate.

This tells us that we are here in presence of two codes, which are chosen on grounds of the situational setting's formality. Diglossia or not, there seems to be functional distribution

of the two sub-varieties. Future work will have to answer the question of whether this switch is observable by other variables as well, and whether additional data support these findings.

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