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978-1-107-02208-9 - The Making of Vernacular Singapore English: System, Transfer, and Filter
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The Making of Vernacular Singapore English

Singapore English is a focal point across the many subfields of linguistics, as its semantic, syntactic, and phonetic/phonological qualities tell us a great deal about what happens when very different types of language come together. Sociolinguists are also interested in the relative status of Singapore English compared to other languages in the country. This book charts the history of Singapore English and explores the linguistic, historical, and social factors that have influenced the variety as it is spoken today. It identifies novel grammatical features of the language, discusses their structure and function, and traces their origins to the local languages of Singapore. It places grammatical system and usage at the core of analysis, and shows that introspective and corpus data are complementary. This study will be of interest to scholars and advanced students working on language contact, world varieties of English, historical linguistics, and sociolinguistics.

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The Making of Vernacular Singapore English

System, Transfer, and Filter

Zhiming Bao

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Series editor's foreword

The series *Cambridge Approaches to Language Contact* (CALC) was set up to publish outstanding monographs on language contact, especially by authors who approach their specific subject matter from a diachronic or developmental perspective. Our goal is to integrate the ever-growing scholarship on language diversification (including the development of creoles, pidgins, and indigenized varieties of colonial European languages), bilingual language development, code-switching, and language endangerment. We hope to provide a select forum to scholars who contribute insightfully to understanding language evolution from an interdisciplinary perspective. We favor approaches that highlight the role of ecology and draw inspiration both from the authors' own fields of specialization and from related research areas in linguistics or other disciplines. Eclecticism is one of our mottoes, as we endeavor to comprehend the complexity of evolutionary processes associated with contact.

We are very proud to add to our list Zhiming Bao's *The Making of Vernacular Singapore English: System, Transfer, and Filter*, which is bound to generate a lot of discussion about substrate influence not only on new Englishes but also on new colonial varieties of European languages, especially those disfranchised as creoles and pidgins and typically denied genetic kinship with their lexifiers. This study is soundly grounded in the contact ecology of Singapore, in which the presence of Sinitic language varieties, especially Hokkien and Cantonese, has been constant and growing since the foundation of the British colony in the early nineteenth century. Lumping all the relevant Sinitic varieties together, because of typological similarities among them, we may say that the presence of Chinese has eclipsed that of Malay, though this is also spoken in the surrounding polities, at least based on the number of speakers in the contact setting.

Bao argues that Chinese is the dominant source of substrate influence on the syntax and semantics of Vernacular Singapore English (VSE), although this does not exclude the contribution of Malay. While he also submits that substrate influence is more likely to transfer as an entire subsystem, he points out that his hypothesis should not be confused with relexification, as the lexifier

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still functions as a filter, determining whether or not the transferred subsystem is compatible with its own structures.

There are various notions to sort out, including how different the system-hybridization proposed by Bao to account for the emergent grammar of VSE is from the role of systemic congruence in favoring influence but not necessarily faithful transfers from a particular substrate language or group thereof. On the other hand, it is undeniable that VSE has syntactic and semantic peculiarities, notwithstanding pragmatic ones, which are like those in Chinese and distinguish it from other Englishes, especially those identified in the New Englishes literatures as Native Englishes. Bao invites the reader to distinguish between, on the one hand, "substratum transfer," when speakers have carried a substrate grammatical feature over to the emergent language, and, on the other, "convergence-to-substratum," "when a construction of the lexifier acquires the lexical or grammatical meanings of a semantically similar construction in the substratum." Yet, "substrate-derived" grammatical features are not necessarily faithful replicas of the source language, which underscores paying attention to various constraints that the author invokes to account for his substrate-based account of the emergence of VSE within the emergentist framework of Construction Grammar.

Bao also addresses the following two issues: Which particular group within the Singaporean ethnolinguistically heterogeneous population exerted the most (critical) influence on the emergence of VSE? And is it justified to claim that VSE's lexifier is scholastic English? This, of course, also raises the question of whether it is justified in the first place to assume that only one kind of variety was targeted by a particular population, as much as that of whether the kinds of factors that indigenized a language in a particular contact ecology account the same way for the indigenization of the same language in another contact ecology. Students of the emergence of creoles and New Englishes are served with several other implicit issues and questions regarding the constraining roles of the lexifier and the substrate languages in the divergence evolution the European target languages in the colonies. Well documented from reliable corpora (notably the International Corpus of English, both the British and the Singapore components) and by participant observation, *The Making of Vernacular Singapore English* provides a great deal of material to examine and food for thought to students of language contact from the point of view of language genesis.

Salikoko S. Mufwene, University of Chicago

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Acknowledgments

For the past twenty years or so, I have been preoccupied with the curious grammar of vernacular English spoken in Singapore, a modern metropolis that has its origin as a British crown colony and has been since its annexation a vibrant confluence of migratory populations speaking a plethora of tongues. The vernacular grammar is "curious" because it has undergone extensive contact-induced grammatical restructuring, with the addition of grammatical constructions or meanings derived from the local languages. How English emerges as Singapore English is a complex and ongoing process of central concern to contact linguistic theorizing. In a series of papers, published over more than a decade, I have sketched a systemic, usage-based approach to contact-induced grammatical change, each paper focusing on one aspect of the process. As time goes by, some of the theoretical positions argued for in earlier papers are no longer valid in view of more data and different analytical perspectives. There have been changes, some substantial, in theoretical assumption, analysis, and terminology. When Salikoko Mufwene suggested to me that I contribute a volume to the *Cambridge Approaches to Language Contact* series, of which he is editor, I jumped at the opportunity wholeheartedly.

The literature on Singapore English has grown rapidly since the 1980s. It is not an exaggeration to say that Singapore English is one of the most studied varieties of New English, and continues to attract attention from scholars of World English and of general contact linguistics. Writing the book gave me an opportunity to incorporate recent advances in the study of Singapore English and in contact-linguistic theory, and to reflect on the analyses first advanced in the papers published in various journals and integrate them into an up-to-date theoretical model of contact-induced grammatical restructuring. For this, I would like to thank Salikoko Mufwene not only for his suggestion but also for his close and critical reading of the manuscript. I hope the book offers an empirically sound and theoretically coherent narrative. Helen Barton, the commissioning editor at Cambridge University Press, deserves a hearty note of thanks for her help in making sure that the manuscript is prepared in good order.

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I would also like to thank my teachers, colleagues, students, and friends who are too numerous to name. I have benefited enormously from formal and informal discussions with them about the Singapore English phenomena and the analyses reported in the book. I would also like to thank the Center for the Study of Language and Cognition, Zhejiang University, for awarding me a visiting Guangbiao Chair Professorship that allowed me to spend one and half months in 2014 on its beautiful campus in Hangzhou. Some of the revision was accomplished there. Finally, I would like to thank the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore, for a book grant that allowed me to ensure the accuracy of the data reported in the book.

Chapter 3 is based on the paper entitled "The aspectual system of Singapore English and the systemic substratist explanation" (*Journal of Linguistics* 41, 2 [2005]: 237–267 © Cambridge University Press). Chapter 4 is based on two papers; one is entitled "The origins of empty categories in Singapore English" (*Journal of Pidgin and Creole Languages* 16, 2 [2001]: 275–319) and the other "Systemic transfer, topic prominence, and the bare conditional in Singapore English" (with Hui Min Lye, *Journal of Pidgin and Creole Languages* 20, 2 [2005]: 269–291). Chapter 5 is based on the paper entitled "*One* in Singapore English" (*Studies in Language* 33, 2 [2009]: 338–365). Chapter 6 is based on the paper entitled "A usage-based approach to substratum transfer: The case of four unproductive features in Singapore English" (*Language* 86, 4 [2010]: 792–820). Chapter 7 is based on two papers; one entitled "*Must* in Singapore English" (*Lingua* 120, 7 [2010]: 1727–1737), the other "Convergence-to-substratum and the passives in Singapore English" (in *Creoles, their Substrates, and Language Typology*, TSL 95, ed. Claire Lefebvre. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2011, pp. 253–270).

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A	adjective
AGR	agreement
ASP	aspectual marker
CL	classifier
COMP	complementizer
e	empty category
EXEMPLAR	the set of exemplars
F	feature
F_i	feature of substrate language
F_j	feature of lexifier language
F_k	feature of contact language
FRAME	the set of frames
$FRAME_i$	the set of frames of F_i
$FRAME_j$	the set of frames of F_j
$FRAME_k$	the set of frames of F_k
GEN	genitive marker
IP	inflectional phrase
LEXFILTER	Lexifier Filter
LF	Logical Form
LOC	locative
N	noun
NP	noun phrase
NOM	nominalizer
P	preposition
PASS	passive
PP	prepositional phrase
PR	pronoun
PRED	predicate
PRT	particle
Q	question marker
QP	quantifier phrase
R	relative pronoun

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Spec	specifier
SysTrans	System Transfer
TOP	topic
TP	topic phrase
V	verb
VP	verb phrase
VAR	variable
XP	major phrasal category of any type

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