



Brief Study of Common Features Observable Across Asian Englishes; Case study of Singapore., Malaysia, Hong Kong and Philippines

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ABSTRACT

This paper examined the Common Features Observable Across Asian Englishes; Case study of Singapore., Malaysia, Hong Kong and Philippines. It is widely accepted that living languages change over time and space. English used in environments different from its origin adjusts and changes to suit its new environments. Looking back at the history of English, it is important to note that the contact with other languages has always been the major cause of linguistic change in English. It concluded that although the current emphasis on the importance of English in Asian education systems may be explained by reference to a number of historical, economic and educational factors linked to Asian modernity and the upward aspirations of the growing Asian middle class, it is salutary to consider that educationally and linguistically the promotion of English comes at a certain cost. The challenge for language education in the region is to consider critically how English is best taught and best used for pedagogical purposes, within complex multilingual education systems, an issue requiring sensitivity to local issues and the specific sociolinguistic contexts of diverse societies in the Asian region.

Keywords: Asian Englishes, Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Philippines



INTRODUCTION

It is widely accepted that living languages change over time and space. English used in environments different from its origin adjusts and changes to suit its new environments. Looking back at the history of English, it is important to note that the contact with other languages has always been the major cause of linguistic change in English. Kirkpatrick (2012: 6) claims that, it has never been “untouched” by other languages. For example, Classical Greek, Latin, French, and many other languages have left their marks on English. The language has, as stated by Crystal (2004: 128), “married other local languages: And is living in new houses, wearing new clothes, eating exotic foods”. The New Englishes in Southeast Asia is not an exception. In the region, English is often used in two forms: standard English and colloquial English. While the former is not much different from British English or American English and therefore is not the subject discussed here, the latter (called Singlish, Manglish, Taglish, and Hong Kong English) is distinctly different with respect to phonology, lexis, syntax, and discourse.

Phonology

Like almost all other new varieties of English in the world, New Englishes in Southeast Asia are best identified through their phonological features.

Bao (1998), cited in Bautista and Gonzalez, (2006), and Leimgruber (2010) note the following phonological features of Colloquial Singapore English:

1 Stops are unaspirated in all positions.

2 /θ/ becomes /t/ and /ð/ becomes /d/ before a vowel (thin → /tin/; then → /den/); /θ/ and /ð/ become /f/ in word-final position (breath → /brɛf/; breathe → /brif/).

3 There is a lack of length contrast and tenseness contrast in vowels (bit/ beat → /bit/).

4 There are no syllabic laterals and nasals.

5 In word-final position, voiced stops become voiceless (leg → lek).

6 Diphthongs are often absent (/ei/ and /əʊ/ in face and goat → /e:/ and /o:/) 7 It has syllable-timed, rather than stress-timed, rhythm (every syllable is given equal stress, or when one syllable is stressed, the stress may be on a different syllable from that stressed in RP). Zuraidah and Schneider (2000/ 2004, cited in Bautista and Gonzalez, 2006) describe the characteristics of Malaysian English phonology as follows:

1 merger of /i:/ and /ɪ/: feel – fill, bead – bid all have /i/.

2 merger of /u:/ and /ʊ/: pool – pull, Luke – look all have /u/.

3 merger of /ɛ/ and /æ/: set – sat, man – men all have /ɛ/.

4 merger of /ɒ/ and /ɔ:/: pot – port, cot – caught all have /ɔ/.

5 variant realizations of /ə/: schwa tends to get replaced by a full vowel, the quality of which frequently depends upon orthography.

6 monophthongization of diphthongs: e.g. coat, load with /o/, make, steak with /e/.



7 shift in the placement of accents.

8 omission of final voiceless stop or its replacement by a glottal stop in monosyllabic words with a CVC structure.

9 reduction of word-final consonant clusters, usually dropping the alveolar stop.

10 replacement of dental fricatives by stops. Gonzalez (1978, cited in Bautista and Gonzalez, 2006), and McArthur (1998) characterize the following phonological features of Philippine English:

1 absence of schwa

2 absence of aspiration of stops in all positions.

3 substitution of /a/ for /æ/, /ɔ/ for /o/, /I/ for /i/, /ɛ/ for /e/.

4 substitution of /s/ for /z/, /ʃ/ for /ʒ/, /t/ for /θ/, /d/ for /ð/, /p/ for /f/, /b/ for /v/.

5 simplification of consonant clusters in final position.

6 syllable-timed, rather than stress-timed, rhythm.

7 shift in placement of accents.

8 rhotic (/r/ is pronounced in nearly all positions of a word).

9 intonation widely characterized as 'singsong'.

In Hong Kong English there are differences or omission in ending sounds, as word-final consonants are always voiceless and unreleased (glottalized) in Cantonese with the exception of /m/, /n/ and /ŋ/. One may notice the merging of the contrast of voiceless/voiced consonants with aspirated/unaspirated if there is any contrast exists in Cantonese. The stop [p] becomes [ph] and [b] becomes [p]; [t] becomes [th] and [d] becomes [t]; [k] becomes [kh] and [g] becomes [k]. There is merging of voiceless/voiced consonants into voiceless if no contrast in aspirated/unaspirated in Cantonese. Both [f] and [v] become [f]; both [z] and [s] become [s]; both [tʃ] and [dʒ] become [tʃ]; both [ʃ] and [ʒ] become [ʃ]; both [θ] and [ð] become [θ] (difficulty in pronouncing [θ] too). The process of devoicing acts upon obstruents in word-final position: big [bik], bag [bæk].

Lexis

According to Leimgruber (2011), most adaptations in New Englishes in Southeast Asia, concerns vocabulary, which shows substantial creativity among their users. Since English arrived in the region, new cultures and new needs have led to the creation of a wide range of new words that represent the required meanings more adequately. Local places, things and objects for which terms are absent in English also have to be created. As a result, large-scale borrowing has happened. Bautista and Gonzalez (2006) suggest that adaptation is the most obviously apparent in loanwords, which can be seen in the following examples:



Singapore English Meaning

Abang elder brother; male cousin

Bodoh dull, unintelligent

Hanram Prohibited

Mabok intoxicated, drunk

tang hoon rice flour

Philippine English Meaning

amok Crazy

barang luggage, bits and pieces

boondock Mountain

carabao a water buffalo

kundiman a love song

Loan translation, a form of borrowing from one language to another whereby the semantic components of a given term are literally translated into their equivalents in the borrowing language, is also a very common feature in Southeast Asian Englishes. For example:

Malaysian English Loan Translation

red packet a sum of money folded inside red paper and given at the Chinese New Year to unmarried younger relatives

spring roll dish consisting of a savoury mixture of vegetables and meat rolled up in a thin pancake and fried

Philippine English Loan Translation

open the light/radio turn on the light/radio

since before yet for a long time

joke only I'm teasing you

you don't only know you just don't realize

I am ashamed to you I am embarrassed because I have been asking you so many favours.

making foolishness Misbehaving

Another important feature of Southeast Asian English lexis is changes in the meaning of words. Bautista and Gonzalez (2006) provide two examples from Singapore English: stay is used for permanent or long-term residence (cf. British English, in which live is used for permanent



residence and stay for temporary or short-term residence) and keep describes an activity – I'm going to keep these photos in that drawer (cf. British English, where keep describes a state – The tools are kept in the shed). Kirkpatrick (2007) also takes confident and proud as examples of meaning shift in Brunei English: confident has only negative connotations and means over-confident or arrogant. In the same way, proud has only negative connotations and is a translation equivalent of the Malay word *sombong*, which means haughty.

In addition, hybrids – where a compound is formed of words from different languages – are common in the new varieties of English of the region. Examples are, buco juice (the juice of a young coconut), pulot boy (a tennis ball boy), common tao (an ordinary Filipino) in Philippine English, or ice kacang (dessert of ice with syrup and jelly), mama shop (convenience stores), sarong partygirl (a local, solely Asian woman, who usually dresses and behaves in a provocative manner, and who exclusively dates and prefers white men) in Singapore English (Kirkpatrick, 2007).

The lexical innovations as well as new collocations are so many that, according to Bautista and Gonzalez (2006), they have now been gathered in the multi-sourced Macquarie junior dictionaries of Asian English for Singapore, Malaysian, and Hong Kong English, and Anvil-Macquarie Dictionary of Philippine English for High School (2000) for Philippine English.

Grammar

The grammar of standard Southeast Asian English is not different from that of other versions of Standard English around the world. Whereas, the grammar of informal varieties in the region differs from the standard form quite markedly so it is of more central concern of extensive studies.

Alsagoff and Ho (1998, cited in Bautista and Gonzalez, 2006) present the following features of Colloquial Singapore English grammar:

- Features connected with the verb:
 - 1 past tense and present tense not morphologically marked;
 - 2 copula dropped to describe states;
 - 3 adverbials preferred to morphological marking of aspect;
 - 4 progressive aspect marked with -ing, sometimes with still;
 - 5 habitual aspect marked with always.
- Features connected with the noun:
 - 6 non-count nouns treated as count;
 - 7 indefinite article dropped;
 - 8 relative clause with different word order and one.
- Features of sentence structure:

9 subject and sometimes object dropping (PRO-drop);

10 conjunction dropping;

11 use of or not;

12 use of tag question is it?.

Concerning informal Malaysian English, the grammatical features have been characterized (McArthur, 1998; Schneider, 2003/2004, cited in Bautista and Gonzalez, 2006) as follows:

1 missing noun inflectional endings (mostly the plural -s and sometimes the genitive -s);

2 missing sentence constituents (object, subject, auxiliary verb, copula, preposition) giving the impression of phrasal “telegraphic” speech;

3 variant complementation patterns following verbs;

4 wrong concord in noun phrases;

5 innovations in phrasal verbs;

6 the use of reflexive pronouns to form emphatic pronouns.

McArthur (1998) and Bautista and Gonzalez (2006) have pointed out the following characteristics of Philippine English grammar:

1 lack of subject-verb agreement, especially in the presence of an intervening prepositional phrase or expression;

2 faulty tense-aspect usage including unusual use of verb forms and tenses,

especially use of the past perfect tense for the simple past or present perfect, use of the continuous tenses for habitual aspect;

3 lack of tense harmony;

4 modals would and could used for will and can;

5 adverbial placed at the end of the clause, not between auxiliary and main verb;

6 non-idiomatic two- or three-word verbs;

7 variable article usage – missing article where an article is required; an article where no article is required;

8 faulty noun subcategorization, including non-pluralization of count nouns and pluralization of mass nouns;

9 lack of agreement between pronoun and antecedent;

10 one of the followed by singular noun;

11 Verbs that are generally transitive used intransitively.



Discourse

According to Bautista and Gonzalez (2006), analysis of discourse features of Southeast Asian English is just starting. One important feature found in the recent studies is the wide use of particles. Speakers tend to use a large number of clause-final discourse particles in their communication. Leimgruber (2011) provides a list of such particles used in Singapore English:

ah tentative marker, continuation marker

hah question marker

hor attempts to garner support for a proposition

lah mood marker, appeals for accommodation

leh marks a tentative suggestion/request

lor indicates obviousness or resignation

mah marks information as obvious

what/wot marks obviousness and contradiction

meh indicates scepticism

ya conveys (weak) emphasis and uncontroversiality

These particles often stand at the end of sentences and are added to the utterance in order to derive speakers' different meanings. Take "lah" for example, in Malay, 'lah' is used to change a verb into a command or to soften its tone, particularly when usage of the verb may seem impolite. Similarly, 'lah' is frequently used with imperatives in Singlish:

Ex: *Drink lah!* – Just drink!

Code-switching, the case in which people may change between two or even three languages within a speech act, is another common and natural feature in multilingual communities like those of Southeast Asia. In such multilingual societies where English has a place alongside other local languages, according to Graddol (1997: 12), speakers often code-switch. While the first language may be a sign of solidarity or intimacy, English carries overtones of social distance, formality, or officialdom. Where two people know two languages, they may switch-code as part of a negotiation of their relationship. Such change in language is necessitated also by the lack of appropriate vocabulary or other expressions in local languages, or because the topic under discussion belongs to a domain that is better suited to a particular language, or even merely because speakers feel comfortable when communicating in two or more languages. In the Philippines, for example, code-switching is extensively used not only in daily life conversations, but also in motion pictures, on television and radio, or in certain types of informal writing in daily newspapers and weekly magazines (McArthur, 1998: 82). McArthur cited the following utterance from a Philippine movie in which the character Donna reveals that since she turned producer in 1986, her dream was to produce a movie for children:



“Kaya, nang mabasa ko ang Tuklaw sa Aliwan Komiks, sabi ko, this is it. And I had the festival in mind when finally I decided to produce it. Pambata talaga kasi ang Pasko,” (“That is why when I read the story “Snake-Bite” in the Aliwan Comic Book, I told myself, this is it Because Christmas is really for children)

According to Bautista and Gonzalez (2006: 137), code-switching in Malaysia happens between English and Malay or Tamil or Chinese among accomplished bilinguals for rhetorical and accommodation purposes. But among speakers not highly competent in English, code switching is used as a repair strategy.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to survey a range of issues relating to English across Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong and Philippines as well as approaches to Asian Englishes as localised varieties of English. Although the current emphasis on the importance of English in Asian education systems may be explained by reference to a number of historical, economic and educational factors linked to Asian modernity and the upward aspirations of the growing Asian middle class, it is salutary to consider that educationally and linguistically the promotion of English comes at a certain cost. The challenge for language education in the region is to consider critically how English is best taught and best used for pedagogical purposes, within complex multilingual education systems, an issue requiring sensitivity to local issues and the specific sociolinguistic contexts of diverse societies in the Asian region.

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