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NEW ENGLISHES: THE SINGAPORE CASE

Review of New Englishes: the Singapore Case, 1988
Edited by J. Foley
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By Vanitha Saravanar

This is a collection of papers on studies of English in Singapore, (two reprinted), with individual contributions and other which are the result of staff-student collaboration at the National University of Singapore. The papers consider some of the empirical research questions that previous studies have raised question of what standards ought to be applied, whether it should be endonormative or exonormative standards for spoken English in Singapore and for speech models in the school system, whether codification for written English in Singapore is possible or even necessary, as well as certain methodological concerns such as sampling techniques, controls on data collection, and the use of primary data. The collection includes case studies of child language acquisition and an extensive bibliography on the work already done on English in Singapore.

The first chapter in this volume is a review of studies in English in Singapore by Foley. He notes that earlier studies consisted of error analysis studies and that this was followed by attempts at categorising standard and non-standardisms of English used in Singapore. Other studies followed; studies that pioneered descriptions of indigenised Singapore English (SgE) and quantified systematic variation in syntactic features, for example, tense marking, third person singular, present tense, the occurrence of BE and of articles.

The third stage was an attempt at describing what constitutes Standard Singapore English in order to provide a starting point for the codification of the variety used by English-educated Singa-

poreans. This was followed by studies which looked at the role of education and of teachers for the future development of English in Singapore.

There has also been interest in studies on syntax in new Englishes (Platt et al. 1984, Platt and Ho 1987, Vanithamani S 1989). Syntax is probably the part of English grammar that is most homogeneous in other varieties of English. Syntactic correctness relates to the desire to remain within international standards. Thus deviances are looked upon as less permissable than in other areas. Gorlach (1988) considers some of these issues.

Gupta's study (reprinted from English World Wide 1986, 7:1) looks at this area of standardization and refines some of the ideas presented in an earlier paper by Tay and Gupta (1983). It looks at local frequencies in indigenised features and stigmatisation versus tolerance in such features. The syntax and lexis of Singapore English were examined in texts written by "high prestige users of English in Singapore", writers who are educated in English, and who use English regularly. Gupta uses three criteria for establishing a standard for written SgE: local prestige usage, usage not locally stigmatised and usage not internationally stigmatised. This study confirms as other earlier studies have done that the syntactic features and lexical extensions of SgE are not only parallel to but largely identical to those found in other second language varieties of English. Many of the nonstandardisms arise in areas which concern linguistic features not easily susceptible to codification in the form of rules that can be systematically taught, for example, article choice and verb group choice. Platt and Ho(1988), for instance, investigated two arguments for the linguistic features in Singapore English: one being language — specific influences and the other language-universal learning strategies in an extensive study on past tense marking in Singapore English.

In discussing the extent to which an endonormative standard would be acceptable in Singapore, Gupta echoes the conflict that other educators and
linguists are aware of (Lim, 1987), that while in real terms there is in Singapore a local standard, there is a climate of opinion which would reject an official endonormative standard. Gupta cautions that as Singapore is committed to the promotion of Standard British English, and as RP is actively promoted in the media and in schools an endonormative standard is unlikely to be accepted. It is probably not possible to legislate a standard when the main sources for promoting a standard are the media and the school system where textbooks and materials are centrally controlled. In pedagogical terms syntactic patterns that are not standard are seen as “mistakes”.

The consequences for language planning not only in Singapore but in other ESL situations are considered by Gorlach (1988:23).

... the question whether the possible acceptance and acceptability of local English, however restricted, may have consequences for language planning. In other words, is there any chance of implementing local norms of correctness, once they are codified in regional grammars and dictionaries of English and sanctioned by schoolboards and ministries of education? Will such norms then be used in the administration and the media? In such developments the fears that international intelligibility could be impaired or even lost must be taken into account.

Brown addresses himself in two papers to the problems of what to teach in pronunciation. The first paper examines various features which have been cited as contributing to the staccato impression of the Singaporean pronunciation of English. The definition of the term staccato in its technical musical sense is given as a “special manner of performing musical phrases without slurring the notes together, articulating each separately. The staccato actually shortens the value of each note as written by the insertion of a minute pause”. Brown examines the lack many of the features of connected speech in (EMS) which are products of the stress-based rhythm in native accents. Brown critically discusses the syllable-stress-timing theory of speech rhythm, and concludes that this analysis may be invalid and, in any case, the rhythm of Singaporean pronunciation may be less of a contributory factor to the staccato effect than other features such as the absence of features associated with weakening of vowels in unstressed syllables to /ə, ʌ/ liaison, the absence of linking and intrusive /r/, the shortening of vowels, frequent use of glottal stop for /p, t, k/ with its typical shortening effect.

Brown considers phonological issues that go beyond accent to basic intelligibility. In his second paper Brown shows the various ways in which the RP vowel system may be considered somewhat typical of English accents generally, and therefore undesirable as a model to be insisted on by teachers in the school. RP spoken by a minority in Britain no longer occupies the prestigious position it once had in Britain and RP pronunciation from non-native (including EMS) speakers are often judged to be affected.

The vowels of speakers in Singapore and Malaysia are compared with RP and Brown recommends that the following distinctions be maintained between RP/ɪ, ɪ, æ, ɛ, ə, ʌ/ since these vowels are kept distinct in all native accents of English, these vowels occur relatively frequently in speech and many minimal pairs rely on these differences.

The author recognises that some exonormative influence is necessary if the form of speech is to rise above the status of a local lingua franca, and have wider intelligibility.

At the Institute of Education lecturers approach student teachers’ speech by diagnosing and focussing first on aspects of intelligibility. They also stress that teachers do need to know and recognise the phonemes of RP so that they can discuss pronunciation intelligibly and use the available pronouncing dictionaries competently. There are also other aesthetic and expressive considerations that enter into speech training for teachers so that they can read standard English story-books and texts with acceptable intonation and expressiveness.

Most educators accept that a range of standards will develop at different levels of the education system according to the perceived needs of the students and society. At the higher level of education an exonormative standard is likely to be more important to Singapore students as Singapore’s international position continues to develop.

It has to be recognised that most Singapore students do not come from English speaking homes.
Such students learn their English in school and school registers are mainly formal registers as they often consist of classroom talk and teacher talk. Students have little exposure to native accents let alone conversational registers.

Several studies in this volume relate to child language acquisition. Foley’s study (reprinted in TESOL '84) examined the linguistic structures of 30 subjects aged between 3 to 5. He concludes that the analysis of spoken data confirmed Platt and Weber’s (1980) findings on the syntactic features of colloquial SE: word final consonants are reduced or omitted and inflectional endings, copulas, auxiliaries before ing are absent.

He found features of telegraphic speech which are common to the development of native speaker pre-school child language (also confirmed by Bradshaw and Hew 1988 and Harrison and Lim 1988 same volume).

As the study found an increasing number of pre-school children who are already fluent in colloquial Singapore English, Foley as well as Harrison and Lim (this volume) argue for a more fluency-focused syllabus and an approach which operates on a more oral basis of fluent if inaccurate language rather than a careful teaching of accurate items.

Several developments have taken place since these articles were written. The recommended approaches for language and reading instruction in lower primary schools are reported in Ng (1987), co-ordinator of the Reading Skills Project set up at Institute of Education. An approach that has been extensively implemented in the REAP and LEAR programmes is in using the experiences and resources children bring to the learning task and using them as starting points. The teacher extends the child’s language by using vocabulary and structures appropriate for the child. Children are encouraged to use and write down with the help of the teacher patterns and language that they already know in story form. It has been noted by teachers that these stories are read by children with relative ease and are used to reinforce the oral vocabulary and structures and reading related concepts about print. The goal is communication wherein language acquisition proceeds by verbal interaction in the target language and not simply by repetition, drilling and imitation.

Training and retraining programmes at the Institute of Education, the RIELC and the British Council now emphasise a functional-communicative approach to language teaching.

But as Ng (1987) observed in her survey of schools one needs to recognise many teachers’ brave efforts in the face of enormous external constraints, some of which are large class enrolment (40), classrooms allowing little mobility, tight syllabi, inflexible time tabling and examination pressures in primary 3 and 6.

Bradshaw and Hew report a case study on the language used in a Chinese family between mother and child in a household where English is one of the dominant languages used with the child. The authors found that the ‘Baby Talk’, analyzed had many of the features found in monolingual English-speaking societies. The authors note that since the syntactic simplifications observed in monolingual ‘Baby Talk’ are also present in Singapore English no conclusive claims can be made.

They conclude that an adequate theory of language acquisition, especially the multilingual environment of Singapore, must attend much more to the social functions that language performs in negotiating the purposes and meanings that make up the linguistic world that the child and the parents inhabit.

The last two papers in this volume concern themselves with some areas in the syntax of Singapore English which cause no problem at the intra-communication level within Singapore but may be problematic in wider inter-communication at an international level.

In the first study Harrison and Lim looked at the interrogatives used by young children. They found that the pattern of acquisition shared some of the features found in monolingual English-speaking children. These results are similar in general terms with Foley’s study on syntactic features used by children and adults with children in that the developmental pattern shows influences from and interactions with home language, that is, Chinese dialects and non-English speech addressed to the child.

Tan’s case study looked at the patterns of code-mixing and code-switching in one household (the
author's) in Singapore and within one setting ie the home. The study focussed on a restricted number of speakers and a handful of conversations.

Tan notes in her study that although the participants shared the same background and certain context-bound expressions as in a closed network situation, their switching strategies varied with their own personal habitual usage of a language or languages. The consequence of this is that language usage cannot be predicted simply from the fact that they share the same family and neighbourhood background.

For an insightful understanding of codemixing and switching future studies need to consider the following: bigger samples, different families and different neighbourhood backgrounds and the different languages used as well as a consideration of social factors which enables one to make particular code choices.

In the last paper Loh and Harrison looked at negative duality in Standard English (SE), which has been noted as different from standard English. They found that the syntax reflects some aspects of the background languages found in Singapore and that these syntactic features prevail even in this educated variety.

They conclude that SE speakers comprehend the English dual, speakers are able to express negatives and there are scant grounds for supposing an inability to process two syntactic categories.

The collection of papers in ‘New Englishes’ makes a useful contribution to our understanding of how English is used in Singapore. Through further data collection they confirm a great deal of what previous studies have reported. Only Gupta’s study offers some quantitative data. While there are taxonomies and tabulation of various types of occurrences we need frequencies of occurrences to indicate which features are more prevalent in order to convince language planners and curriculum material writers.

REFERENCES


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THE CASE OF SINGAPORE

Edited by
JOSEPH FOLEY