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The verb phrase in Singapore Tamil English

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The Verb Phrase in Singapore Tamil English.

This paper reports research findings in the acquisition of English by Tamil-English bilingual speakers in Singapore with qualifications ranging from primary to tertiary level education. Spontaneous interviews were recorded in the Labovian tradition (Labov 1972). The data was subjected to quantitative analysis (Bickerton 1975, Romaine 1982) and group means and group range (Andersen 1978). Systematic variation was observed in the performance of speakers.

1.1 Introduction

1 The research question investigated in this paper is the acquisition of in the English spoken by bilingual Tamil-English speakers who went to English medium schools.

The spread of English as a lingua franca in Singapore within the existing linguistic repertoires of a multi lingual society with four official languages, seven Chinese dialects, the main dialects being Hokkien, Cantonese, and Teochew and several Indian languages (Tamil, Malayalam and Punjabi) has complex linguistic and sociolinguistic implications.

Research into linguistic variation offers insights into language acquisition for it investigates the acquisitional patterns of syntactic and morpho-phonemic features. It helps to determine the strategies speakers use in acquiring English.

The findings of this study are of relevance to language planning and language pedagogy in Singapore as one of the issues that is debated is the question of the norms to be set whether an endonormative or exonormative standard ought to be the goal.

In Singapore there is pressure to attain the official target, Standard British English, (SBrE) though there have recently been attempts towards adopting Standard Singapore English (SSE) as a model. It is of linguistic importance to investigate the acquisition of grammatical and morpho-phonemic features to determine the nature of variation in Singapore English (SE) especially at the basilectal level of the continuum.

It is hypothesised that variation in language use is to a considerable extent a function of education and socio-economic status. 59 bilingual

Tamil-English speakers with qualifications ranging from primary to tertiary level were analysed.

1.2 PURPOSE OF STUDY

Four morpho-phonemic verb categories C + ed, C + d/t, Vw + d and Vw change were examined in relation to past tense marking

(i) consonant + ed forms, that is regular past tense verbs formed with suffix -ed (realised phonologically as / d/, d, or ed/ (depending on the variety of English spoken), for example, start - started.

(ii) consonant + d/t forms, that is regular past tense verbs formed with final consonant clusters as in walk - walked or work - worked.

(iii) Vw+d refers to the past tense marking of verbs such as stay, study, marry, etc where in SBrE the last phoneme in the stem is a vowel.

(iv) Vowel change (Vw change), refers to irregular verbs such as give and come and the suppletive go - went.

1.3 CALCULATION OF PERFORMANCE SCORES

Actual occurrences against possible occurrences were calculated and percentages were computed for each informant. This allows for a description of linguistic development and of variation in the development for standard-like structures, as well as for features which deviate from the standard form.

(i) Speakers were assigned to four groups according to number of years of education:

- (a) group 1 six years or less
- (b) group 2 seven to nine years

(c) group 3 ten to twelve years

(d) group 4 tertiary level

(ii) All used to verbs were excluded from the total count as the large number of occurrences of such verbs would skew the data.

(iii) Verbs which referred to past events but were not marked for past tense were regarded as non-occurrences:

(1) He ask us to go far because why opposite Matar gate, what we call, there is a shelter there you know. The Australian soldiers are plenty there, those days Australian soldiers.(2/1)

The non-marking of verbs that require a final alveolar stop /t/ or /d/ for the past tense marker is a feature of both non-native varieties of English and Creoles. In SE it is related to the pronunciation patterns in SE, that is, the reduction of final stop consonant (d/t) in word final position.

Some of the variation may also be attributed to the absence of such phonetic distinctions in the background language Tamil where there is a strong tendency against marking word-final consonants.

The analyses provided on four morpho-phonemic verb categories in Singapore Tamil English, that is, tables 1,2,3 and 4 show that phonological environments influence the marking and non-marking for past in STE.

It is thus observed that STE speakers tended to reduce consonant cluster inflexions for past tense verbs such as *ask, call and happen, shout, explode, interest and scold*. The tendency towards general reduction of clusters to two, or at times to one consonant is a feature of Singapore

English. There is a tendency to reduce consonant clusters in word final clusters, e.g. jus(t), in the plural of nouns, e.g. friend(s) and in third person singular present tense, e.g. like(s).

Investigation of the variable marking of final consonant clusters in regular verbs marked for past tense showed the following results.

1.4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Group 1	37.1
Group 2	67.4
Group 3	89.6
Group 4	95.6

Table 1 : Group Means for C+ed verbs

Group 1	31.4
Group 2	55.7
Group 3	79.6
Group 4	92.2

Table 2 : Group Means for C+d/t Verbs

Words with 3 consonant clusters; e.g. ask (-skt- sibilant + aspirated, velar voiceless stop + alveolar stop) had variable marking.

There were 1/29 tokens from group 1, 0/41 from group 2, 13/27 from group 3, 4/4 from group 4 . This verb shows particular phonetic problems as the cluster /skt/ is a difficult cluster to acquire.

Verbs with two consonant clusters in past tense marking.

Words such as *finish*, *punish*, *push*, marked for past tense in SBrE with consonant cluster / t/, palato-alveolar fricative + stop have variable marking for past tense.

- (2) Okay, now the job jes finish, why you people waiting, go and work. (3/1)

(3) He jes finish his law. (20/1)

There were 0/26 tokens from group 1 , 0/3 from group 1 women , 2/3 from group 3 , 4/7 from group 4). Informants tended to omit spirant + stop cluster [t] and palato-alveolar fricative + stop in these words. This may therefore be regarded as a common feature of SE speakers of lower educational qualifications. Related to this is the lack of distinction speakers have in the use of verbs *ask*, *tell*, and *call*, as in

(4) Then he call us to work there. (2/1)

There were 8/29 tokens from group 1 , 5/17, 4/11 from group 2 , 4/4 group 3 and 1/1 from group 4).

Speakers also tended to omit -nd, (dental nasal + stop consonant cluster) in past tense marking of verbs as in, *happen*, *resign* and *complain*.

These were 12/44 tokens of *happen* from group 1 , 5/16 from group 2, 4/7 from group 3, 7/10 from group 4.

Note that reduplicated verbs are usually unmarked for past by most speakers of SE. In Standard English there would be a tendency to avoid constructions involving the reduplication of past marked verbs, for example,

(5) "Oh I sent my son to UK and I've spent so much", and brag, brag, brag. Yeah there's no reason for him to go around people telling that these kinds of things happen lah. (49/1)

It is thus concluded that the non-marking of verbs that require a final alveolar stop d/t for the past tense marker, for example, *brag*, *kick*, *work*, *stop* (only 31.4% in group 1 and 55.7% in group 2 had past marking) is

related to the pronunciation patterns in Singapore English, that is a reduction of final consonant cluster.

Group 1	40.7
Group 2	70.3
Group 3	90.8
Group 4	95.9

Table 3 : Group Means for Vw+d Verbs

The results show that verbs in the Vw + d category had the second highest past tense marking amongst the four verb categories analysed, especially for speakers in group 2 who had a mean of 70.3.

(i) There were seven informants in group 1 and one informant in group 2 with < 50% scores. Scores ranged from 16.7% to 83.3% in group 1 and 12.5% to 100% in group 2.

(ii) Apart from these eight informants in group 1 and group 2, all the other informants obtained scores of more than 50%.

The following are some examples of variant past tense marking in Vw+d verbs:

(6) be + Vw+ d

I am retired from the Sembawang Shipyard. (9/1)

(7) en + Vw stem for the first verb and copula + V stem for the second verb. :

Japanese enconquer and three and half year or three and quarter years, Japanese was stay here. (2/1)

(8) Vw stem:

So again British capture it, demolish it. (7/1)

(9) Be + Vw + stem:

I was play for my department. (19/2)

Group 1	47.0
2	80.5
3	94.2
4	97.0

Table 4: Group Means for Vw change verbs

In the category of Vw change verbs the following verbs had variable marking: *forget, think, feel, hear, see, have, say, give, come and get.*

1.5 CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

(i) Verbs that have iterative or continuative properties, for example *work, stay, play* are usually not marked for past tense.

(10) 'Born in Singapore, stay in Sembwang, work in Sembwang. {1/1}

(11) 'I was play for my department. {19/2}

(ii) The semantics of verbs such as *start* and *join* which denote inception of action as well as continuative states tend to be unmarked.

(12) I start 1961, 1962 {2/1}

(13) We join there as a yard boy. {1/1}

(iii) Verbs that are inherently conclusive, for example, *pass away* and *die* have higher marking for past tense

(14) Many people died, Nathan,s died, Mum's died. [7/1]

(iv) Verbs such as *finish* which carry the semantics of completed action often occur as verb stem to refer to the past.

(15) They start bombing, everything finish and onward, from, from next day. they start siren. [1/1]

The results show that the pronunciation patterns in Singapore Tamil English determine to some extent the marking and non-marking of past tense verbs. This explains why verbs that require consonant endings have lesser

marking than those that require vowel changes.

In comparing the results with other studies, we find that linguists such Fasold (1972), Platt (1977) and Bickerton (1975) report that the phonetic environment offers some explanation for past marking. Fasold (1972) for instance, found that the phonetic environment which followed the verb had an important effect on the marking of [d] in the -ed suffix. With working class speakers [d] was absent in 27.3% cases. When the next word began with a vowel, [d] was absent in 13% of cases. When the next word began with a consonant 38.6% were absent and 39.1% were absent when a pause followed. Platt (1977b) considered a different set of phonological considerations from that of Fasold. He studied past tense marking of 42 SE informants with different levels of educational and ethnic backgrounds.

The order of marking obtained was:

Vw change > Vw +d > C +ed > C + d/t

Platt et al. (1980: 61) conclude that

...the non-marking of verbs that require a final d or t for the past tense marker is definitely related to pronunciation patterns in Singapore English., i.e. reduction of final consonant clusters.

Platt notes that as a group, those with education above G.C.E. level have 100% scores for C + ed and Vw change. But Singapore Tamil speakers with the same educational level did not have 100% scores in the C + ed category or Vw change category, as a group. But there were individuals with 100% scores. While there was only 60% in this group for Vw + d verbs in Platt's study, in STE it was 90% and over. Although this verb type does not present the problem of final consonantal clusters, it still requires the

actual articulation of a stop to discriminate past tense from stem form. In Platt's study the score for the Vw change type is still only just over 50% compared with over 90% for those with education beyond G.C.E. In STE it was similar, with 47% for those below G.C.E. and 94% with those above G.C.E. Thus the results obtained in Singapore Tamil English is comparable to the earlier study by Platt.

Bickerton (1975) notes that GC in common with pidgins and creoles generally permits far fewer consonant clusters in syllable final position than does English. He notes that except near the acrolect, double consonant clusters seldom occur in formal speech in GC. Comparing V + syll and irregular verbs (which is acquired earlier than V + syllable) he concludes that the complete absence of -ed over the basilectal end of the continuum is a grammatical and not a phonological fact.

Bickerton's argument that the non-marking of verbs for past tense in GC is a grammatical rather than a phonological fact relates to the hypothesis that non-native speakers use semantic specifications to relate to time and aspect. This hypothesis offers a semantic paradigm for investigating bilingual data. The manner in which completion of action, continuity of action and limited duration is perceived by non-native speakers offers further hypotheses for past tense marking in Singapore Tamil English and is was fully investigated and tested in (Vanithamani S. 1989).

1.6 QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

This section examines quantitative analysis of group and individual scores for four verb categories in Singapore Tamil English:

- (i) (C + d /t), (ii) C + ed, (iii) Vw + d and (iv) Vw change from an

applied linguistic perspective.

One of the key objectives of this study is to show the regularities in the Spoken English of Singapore Tamils. Thus the quantitative approach is used to discern regularities in the data which might otherwise not be apparent.

There has been considerable debate in SLA literature on the problem of how one should quantify the linguistic features under investigation.

A description of linguistic acquisition is a description of the linguistic development of speakers. Within the interlanguage hypothesis, for instance, it is felt that a difference should be made between (a) what has been acquired according to the standard norm (b) progress which does not reach the standard norm (c) nothing acquired at all.

Meisel et al. (1981) state that Cazden et al. (1975:42) make a difference between 'acquisition' and 'appearance'; the latter does not imply that an item is used "correctly" according to standard norms. This distinction seems to imply that only when a construction fulfils the norms of the standard variety may one claim that a rule has been acquired; features of what one might call an interim system, on the other hand merely appear without having been acquired. Thus Meisel et al. (1981) argue for longitudinal studies that take into account linguistic progress that is being made towards the acquisition of the standard norm. Stauble and Schumann (1983), in analysing simplification, looked at morphemes representing target-like use, thus taking into consideration the interim grammar of the speakers.¹

R. Andersen (1978) in interpreting performance scores for the subjects in his study, uses implicational scales to refer to 'performance' or

'accuracy' scores which correspond to a longitudinal picture of acquisition over time of certain morphemes but not of others. He uses 'correctly used' and 'not correctly used' (at 80% criterion) rather than 'acquired' and 'not acquired'.

In the present study on Singapore Tamil English the term 'performance' scores is preferred to the term 'correctly used' or 'not correctly used' as this study takes into consideration and some of the syntactic and semantic environments of the interim grammar.

There has been some discussion on how one should refer to linguistic variables. The presence or absence of linguistic forms in non-native varieties have been described in the literature as 'omission', 'insertion', 'absence', 'marked' and 'unmarked' and 'nonstandard' (Bickerton 1975, Chesire 1972, Romaine 1984). These are in no way intended or regarded as pejorative terms but refer to the occurrences or nonoccurrences of linguistic features. The terms 'marked' and 'unmarked' used by Bickerton (1975) are used in this study to refer to verbs 'marked' or 'unmarked' for past tense. This is not intended to be pejorative but rather to note the distinctions in the speakers use of the verbs.

For example STE speakers use time adverbials, as well as structures with *be* + verb stem, to indicate tense and aspect.

1.7 GROUP MEANS AND GROUP RANGE

While past tense marking is, to a considerable extent, a function of education, which explains the decision to group subjects in this study into four groups according to levels of education, this does not predetermine the linguistic performance of subjects. Other types of results may be

obtained by quantifying the data through different scales of measurement to provide further insights into how the subjects performed.

Group Means and Group Range were calculated to show the different levels of accuracy obtained by the subjects.

Group Means provide a useful form of statistics to comment upon how the sample behaved linguistically within their own groups and across the groups, e.g. it enables us to compare a group of subjects with secondary education with a group having only primary education, or for instance how a group of women compare with a group of men with the same educational levels. In order to compare the degree of past tense marking in different syntactic environments for a group or groups, Group Means is a more appropriate form of measurement. Thus the mean is a more reliable measure of how the sample behaved than the percentage scores of each individual in the sample.

1.8 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
C + d/t	31.4	55.7	79.6	92.2
C + ed	37.1	67.4	89.9	95.6
Vw + d	40.7	70.3	90.8	95.9
Vw change	47.1	80.5	94.2	96.9

Table 5: Group Means for Four Groups

All groups show a similar order in their performance scores, Vw change > Vw + d > C + ed > C + d/t.

The results show that past tense marking is favoured in irregular verbs before inflections in regular verbs, Vw + d, C + ed, and C + d/t by Tamil-English bilingual speakers. The results show that speakers from groups 1 and 2 (with lower levels of education) show systematic variation

in past tense marking. While speakers from group 3 showed some variation in C + d/t, there was a greater degree of marking in the other three categories. Though group 4 showed very little variation in past tense marking they did not obtain 100% marking in any of the four categories.

Most studies recognise that past tense marking is favoured with irregular forms in the earlier stages of second language learning. It is useful here to compare the findings in Tamil-English bilinguals with other bilinguals. Krashen (1977:11 table 2.1) shows that the average order of acquisition of grammatical morphemes for English as a second language (children and adults) from an analysis of empirical studies of second language acquisition is that irregular past is acquired before regular past.

The 'average' order of acquisition for children and adults showed the following: plural, copula ("to be"), auxiliary (progressive), article, irregular past, regular past, third person singular and possessive.

Schumann's (1978) longitudinal study of adult language acquisition found that Alberto a Spanish bilingual used the past tense inflection in 3/42 (7%) cases and in experimentally elicited utterances 3/9 (33%). Past irregular was supplied 65% of the time. Schumann cites Hakuta's (1975) explanation that root changes (*go - went, say - said*) in irregular verbs may be more salient than V stem + ed form, example, *play-'played'*.

In first language acquisition it is generally the case that irregular past tense forms are learned first (Slobin 1971:49). Brown's (1973) study on first language acquisition revealed a clear similarity in order of acquisition for 14 grammatical morphemes in children acquiring English as a first language. His results were confirmed in a cross-sectional study by

de Villiers and de Villiers (1973). Dulay and Burt (1974) studied grammatical morphemes among children acquiring English as a second language. They compared their data with L1 acquisition, and found that past irregular possessive, past regular and third person are acquired later in L2. They found that bound morphemes agreed in relative rank order with L1 acquirers. First language (Chinese versus Spanish) did not significantly affect the order.

Bailey et al (1974), also using the BSM (for adults) found a similar difficulty order to Dulay and Burt's L2 order for children. It also reported no L1 effect in (Spanish versus non-Spanish) speakers.

Wolfram's study (1985:232) investigated 16 Vietnamese speakers learning English as a second language. He found that every speaker in this study regardless of age (10-35) or length of residence demonstrated a preference for marking irregular forms. He notes that this constraint on variability is even operative for the youngest speakers who have been the longest (in the U.S.A.), a group that was found to be typically quite proficient in English. There was little variation in this relationship, apparently regardless of the stage of L2 acquisition.

1.9 CALCULATION OF GROUP MEANS FOR THREE SUB-SAMPLES

Next, in order to find out how the sample behaved in terms of acquisition, the sample was divided into sub-samples of top, middle and bottom levels of scores. In other words, the original four groups were dissolved and three sub-samples were formed using the criteria of their performance in terms of the top, middle and bottom levels of performance.

The Group Means for different sub-samples is a valid indication of

performance on the linguistic data at various proficiency levels.

For the calculation of the Group Means for the three sub-samples, subjects who had empty cells were not included. There were four subjects with tokens fewer than five in four cells. There was therefore a sample of 55 speakers. The results are presented in table 6.

As most second language studies use an 80% criterion level, the cut off point for the sample at the bottom level was set at 80% so that all those who scored less than 80% were assigned to the bottom level group, i.e. (22 subjects). The middle group consisted of 17 subjects and the top group 16 subjects. This was taken to be a better decision than to set up an arbitrary cut off point for assigning equal numbers of subjects to the three subsamples.

RESULTS

	Vw change	Vw + d	C + ed	C +d/t
1-16	99.0%	95.1%	(98.1%)	92.9%
17-33	88.5%	83.4%	74.9%	67.9%
34-55	49.7%	43.6%	42.8%	29.9%

Table 6: Group Means for Three Sub-Samples

There was one deviation from the order given by the Group Means and this is enclosed in parentheses.

1.10 GROUP RANGE

Next the Group Range for the subjects' performance on each verb category was calculated. The Group Range is a procedure for calculating the percentage of subjects who used each verb category at different levels of accuracy i.e. 100% of the time, 90-100%, 80-100% and 70-100% of the time. This procedure also reveals certain aspects of

variation in performance which are not apparent through other measurements and is presented in table 4. Table 4 shows the percentage of speakers who never had deviations in using the verb category, the percentage of speakers who had deviations in all verb categories and the percentage of speakers in between.

1.11 RESULTS

Level of accuracy	Vw change	Vw +d	C + ed	C +d/t
100 %	12/59	14/59	18/59	12/59
	20.3%	(23.7%)	(30.5%)	20.3%
90-100%	26/59	18/59	21/59	16/59
	44.1%	30.5%	(35.6%)	27.1%
80-100%	37/59	30/59	29/59	24/59
	62.7%	50.8%	49.2%	40.7%
70-100%	43/59	35/59	33/59	28/59
	72.9%	59.3%	55.9%	47.5%
60-100%	45/59	38/59	37/59	31/59
	76.3%	64.4%	62.7%	52.5%
50-100%	47/59	42/59	40/59	39/59
	70.7%	(71.2%)	67.8%	66.1%
0%	1/59	1/59	1/59	-
	1.7%	1.7%	1.7%	-

(Deviations from the order are enclosed in parentheses)

Table 7: Group Range for the Sample (N=59)

Underlying tables 6 and 7 is the assumption that systematicity in the actual use of second language can be determined using quantitative performance scores, that is, a percentage number of subjects perform better in category X than in using category Y.

Thus the research findings in Singapore Tamil English show systematic variation in morpho-phonological and syntactic features.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Schumann (1982: 338 f.n. 2) discusses the notion of simplification in detail. He states that the absence of morphology is the aspect of simplification that is most problematic because, as many researchers have pointed out, simplification implies having something and then eliminating it. It implies that if learners do not supply morphology it is probably because they do not know it, not because they choose not to use it.

Schumann regards "lack of morphology as simplification because learners do not process it in the input, and therefore it is not available in their output. Thus, absence of morphology results from a process constraint which leads to product level utterances which are morphologically simple in comparison to well formed TL speech,"

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