Verbal Features in Written Singaporean English and Syntactic Influence from Substratum Languages

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Abstract

This paper addresses the possible roles that ethnicity and linguistic background play in the verbal features of written Singaporean Academic English (SAE). It examines specific verbal features of SAE, starting with a discussion of SAE usage patterns in tense and aspect. Following this, it examines a cluster of patterns in the use of the subjunctive mood. Throughout, attention is given to the possible influence of substrate languages on the syntax of written SAE, its relation to research on spoken Colloquial Singaporean English (CSE), and pedagogical implications for SAE writing.

Keywords

Written Singaporean English, Verbal Features, Syntax, Subjunctive

Introduction

1   Background

Singaporean English is a dialect that has been influenced, phonologically and syntactically, by substratum languages of the diverse ethnic communities within the Singaporean population (Yeo & Deterding, 2003), including various Chinese languages (E.g. Mandarin, Hokkien, and Cantonese), Bahasa Malay, and Tamil.

Most research has centered on CSE, which possesses features such as verbal temporal modifiers, *be*-omission, and null-subjects, but there has been little specific analysis of written Singaporean English. Given that academic writing in English tends to follow, to a large extent, set grammatical norms that cut across different dialects of English, this paper seeks to explore features of written SAE that vary from standard English academic writing.

2   Method

This project recruited local university students who grew up in Singapore. A total of 54 students were selected, from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, including Chinese, Malays, and Indians; their language backgrounds ranged from English spoken at home and in their social circles to "mother tongue" (i.e. language of their ethnic group) as the primary language spoken in both contexts[1]. The data was collected with a detailed survey and compared with a passage that they wrote under our supervision in an hour or less. All grammatical aids were disabled to get more accurate data. Their writing patterns were then analyzed and correlated with their background.

3   Results and Discussion
3.1   Comparison across ethnic and linguistic backgrounds

There is little difference in SAE verbal syntax between students of differing ethnic backgrounds who use English in their regular social use. However, the data suggests that there may be clearer divergences in syntax patterns between students who primarily speak their "mother tongue."

3.2   Particular Verbal Features in SAE
3.2.1   Verb Tense and Aspect

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[1]Primary language(s) used: 48 Chinese Singaporeans – 2 English; 38 mixed Chinese and English; 8 Chinese; 1 Indian Singaporean - Tamil and English; 5 Malay Singaporeans - 4 Malay and English speaking; 1 Malay.

Unlike spoken CSE (Ho, 2003; Low & Deterding, 2003), SAE shows few verbal temporal modifiers, such as "already." Instead, SAE shows several verbal change, as follows:

(i) Widespread changing of past tense to the present, particularly after there has been an initial past marker, reflecting CSE usage (Ho, 2003). This changing of past to present tense may occur both in different verb phrases in sentences (e.g. "When I was 18, there was a big and difficult decision I need to make") and within a smaller verb phrase (e.g. "I have experience how God provided in my life").

(ii) Occasionally, the present tense will change to the past tense.

(iii) Present perfect aspect will often be changed to the past simple (e.g. "we have not gone through any live threatening [sic] hardships. This led us to take things for granted easily".

(iv) In a related trend, verb phrases frequently switch the past participle form with a simple infinitive (e.g. "we might not have achieved what we (Singapore) had achieve up to this day"). This shows that they do use the participial form.

As others have mentioned about CSE (Bao, 2015; Ho & Platt, 1993), these variations in tense and aspect in SAE may reflect syntax transfer from Chinese, which typically uses uninflected verb forms with markers to indicate time.

3.2.2 Variations in Treatment of Subjunctive Mood

As noted in CSE (Deterding, 2003; Low & Brown, 2005), the use of "would" and "will" is idiosyncratic in SAE. Our data shows syntactical variability surrounding "would" and the subjunctive mood. In some circumstances, (i) when using the subjunctive mood, there are no subjunctive markers (e.g. "If time travel is possible, and someone from 40 years ago is to travel…"). In other cases, (ii) "will" is used as a subjunctive marker (e.g. "I thought studying in Singapore Polytechnic will be an easy task"). In still other cases, (iii) "would" is used in the present indicative (e.g. "They just have to ask their parents and they would get it."). The variable use of "will," "would," or no marker at all suggests that the subjunctive mood is an unstable concept in SAE, a possible reflection of a category that does not exist in any substrate

languages of Singapore.

4   Conclusion

Our data has not seen extensive use of verbal temporal modifiers in SAE, as would be seen in CSE. It has, though, confirmed extensive variations in verb tense and aspect in written Singaporean English across ethnic lines, as in spoken CSE, that may indicate persistent substratum influence even in written SAE. Furthermore, the data has showed significant variations surrounding the subjunctive mood.

This research has immediate pedagogical interests. Singaporean educators can bolster writing accuracy by addressing student writing within different time frames. Emphasis should be put on indicating through persistent grammatical markers, using tense and aspect, rather than initial and terminal frame markers such as temporal markers. Furthermore, teachers can address differences in mood.

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