

From Post-Creole Continuum to Diglossia: The Case of Singapore English

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ABSTRACT. Singapore English, a recently nativised (Gupta 1994) variety of English, has often been analysed in terms of a continuum (Pakir 1991; Platt 1975; Poedjosoedarmo 1995). A more recent approach (Gupta 1994, 2001) regards this variation as one reflecting a diglossic situation: Standard (Singapore) English is H(igh), Colloquial Singapore English ('Singlish') is L(ow). This paper presents findings from ongoing research into these two approaches.

The current study investigates the speech community's use of Singapore English's inherent variation. Specifically, data collected from fieldwork shows that there is a preference for using more acrolectal or H variants in formal settings than in less formal ones, where basilectal or L variants are preferred. The distribution of percentage rates according to situational settings seems to favour the diglossic view proposed by Gupta.

I conclude by suggesting that these different sociolinguistic typological approaches, rather than being mutually exclusive, represent the variety at different stages in its history: the post-creole continuum (DeCamp 1971; Platt 1975) seems to be giving way to a two-tiered variety, not least because of the advent of new technologies, which have increased the (written) use of Singlish (Gupta 2001), much to the chagrin of governmental policy-makers.

1 Introduction

Two major competing analyses of the variation in Singapore English (henceforth SgE) have been proposed in the literature: the first, put forward by Platt (1975), views the variety essentially as a post-creole continuum (essentially of the type proposed by DeCamp (1971)), and the second, suggested by Gupta (1989; 1994; 2001), regards it in the diglossic framework of Ferguson (1959). Other analyses and models (Pakir 1991; Platt 1977; Poedjosoedarmo 1995) can be viewed as based on either of these two approaches.

This paper, drawing on recent fieldwork in the island-state, attempts to find synchronic support for either of these two models, and will eventually settle for a medial approach. It is argued that the two above models are not mutually exclusive, but rather that they complement each other diachronically.

1.1 The continuum approach

As outlined above, John T. Platt's 1975 approach to SgE variation is that of a continuum, reminiscent of post-creole ones found, for instance, in Jamaica (DeCamp 1971). The two approaches differ in that Platt argues that in the case of SgE, no pidgin was involved in the genesis of the variety. He therefore calls SgE (or rather its basilect, Singlish) a 'creoloid', i.e. a variety which has many features in common with creole languages, but which lacks the initial pidgin required in a traditional creole definition. While this view has recently been challenged (Ansaldo 2004), this technicality is not immediately relevant to our argument here. Platt was describing SgE as it was in 1975, when it already had a good number of native speakers, and exhibited significant sociolinguistic variation. Figure 1 illustrates his view of the situation.

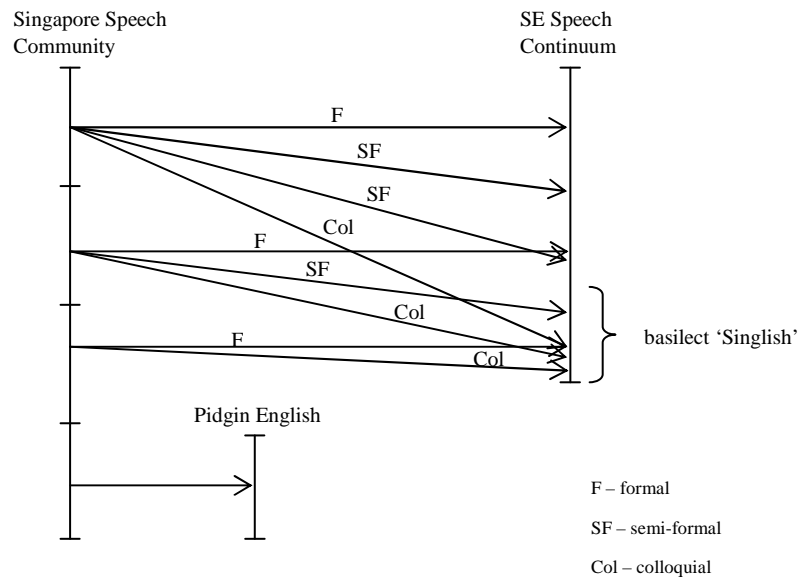


Figure 1: Sub-varieties of SgE available to speakers (Platt 1975: 369)

The right-hand scale on this model stands for the continuum: the acrolect, Standard (Singapore) English is at the top, and the basilect Singlish is at the bottom, separated by a number of indiscrete intervening mesolects¹. The left-hand scale is a representation of the social continuum of the Singapore Speech community. The top classes are at the top, and the lower ones towards the bottom, with every speaker situated somewhere on this scale. Now depending on their position on this social scale, speakers will have at their disposal a given range of lects drawn from the continuum. These include the lect situated at the same level than their social standing, plus all lects between it and the basilect. Thus, the

¹ The 'Pidgin English' category is reserved for non-native speakers and is thus outside of the continuum. We will not be considering its significance here.

higher one is positioned socially, the wider one's range of available lects will be. Universal proficiency in the basilect is assumed.

1.2 The diglossia approach

Anthea Fraser Gupta sees Singlish (or Colloquial Singapore English, CSE) as being in a diglossic relationship with Standard Singapore English (SSE), with the former being L and the latter H. Her analysis (Gupta 1989, 1994, 2001) is explicitly based on a fergusonian type of diglossia (Ferguson 1959), with H and L being in complementary distribution and limited to clearly-defined domains of use. Thus CSE is acquired natively, used with peers in school and during National Service, and essentially in all informal exchanges, particularly inter-ethnic ones. SSE on the other hand is used during school classes, in lectures and official speeches, in the white-collar workplace, and generally in the written language. This has changed of late, with Singlish being extensively drawn on in informal writing such as computer-mediated communication (chatrooms, discussion forums, certain blogs, etc) (Gupta 2001, 2006), and even in some folk literature, including poetry (particularly online, e.g. Talkingcock.com 2003).

What speaks for the diglossia hypothesis is that it is apparently deeply ingrained in the speech community: speakers of SgE are aware of the existence of Singlish, and contrast it openly with SSE. This is further facilitated by language planning policies, which have consistently decried the use of Singlish, and encouraged the use of 'good English' in annual campaigns such as the aptly-named 'Speak Good English Movement'. Speakers' attitude towards their Singlish is ambivalent and ranges from embarrassment to pride (brought about on the one hand by government policy and on the other by the search for a distinct linguistic identity (Ho 2006)), but its opposition to SSE is clearly felt and there is an accepted dichotomy between the two varieties.

1.3 Problems with the two approaches and research question

Having introduced these two competing views of SgE variation, let me turn to a few problems that characterise them. Platt's continuum, firstly, is based on the assumption that every member of the SgE speech community is proficient in CSE. While this is the norm in decreolising communities, SgE seems to have a few members, and this may be a recent development, who do not have access to Singlish (see for instance Hussain (2006), who reports some speakers who only come into contact with the basilect in National Service). This poses a problem for the proposed model, in that the basilectal end of the lectal scale is no longer available to all speakers. It further fails to account for the language attitudes, which, as mentioned above, seem to favour the SSE–CSE dichotomy.

Gupta's diglossia, on the other hand, also presents a number of issues, the most important being that of its apparent inherent contradiction if it is to be based on a

fergusonian type of diglossia. A first problem arises when Gupta (1994; 2001) uses code-switching to explain the mesolects on Platt's scale. A speaker may thus start a sentence in L and switch to H in the course of the utterance. This is in stark contrast with language use in traditional diglossic societies such as those listed by Ferguson (1959)², where each variety is restricted in use to given domains, and intra-sentential code-switching is very rare indeed. A further problem is the seemingly socially-stratified nature of variation in the SgE speech community. It appears that speakers higher up on the social scale use H more often than those 'below' them – this is again unusual in traditional diglossia where L is the native variety of everyone in the speech community, regardless of social status.

These are the issues which a potential new model will need to tackle. The research question is therefore phrased along the following lines: 'is the variation in SgE best analysed in terms of a continuum or of diglossia; or is it possibly of a third, hitherto ignored kind?'. The empirical research described below will, it is hoped, shed some light on this.

2 Current study

In this section I present the outline of the current study, with results from data recorded *in situ*. These will then be analysed quantitatively and qualitatively to try and give some insight as to the research question.

2.1 Methodology

The informants for this study were in their first year after leaving secondary school (average age 17.5 years). The choice of a young sample was motivated by the fact that English language use is likely to be most prominent among young speakers, particularly since the introduction of English as the only medium of education in 1987. A further reason was the relatively easy recruitment that this choice facilitated: by liaising with post-secondary institutions, a complete sample was soon obtained.

Schools were selected on the basis of their academic requirements for admission. Three were retained; namely, in decreasing order of entry requirements, one junior college (which delivers A-levels and prepares for university), one polytechnic (preparing for a more practice-oriented diploma), and one vocational training institute (leading to a certificate). These three options account for almost 90% of secondary school leavers. In each institution, four students per major

² For example German-speaking Switzerland (Standard German (H) vs Swiss German (L)) and Arabic speech communities (Standard/Classical Arabic (H) vs Vernacular (L)), but also the Czech situation with its Spisovná (H) vs Hovorová (L).

ethnic group (Chinese, Malay, and Indian) were selected, thus amounting to twelve students per school and thirty-six informants in total.

Informants were interviewed in ethnically homogeneous groups of four, and in four situational settings decreasing in formality: first, an individual interview with me, second, a dialogue with one of their group, in my presence, third, a task-based group recording with all four, where I left the room, and fourth, a radio-microphone recording of free speech in an informal location (the school canteen).

This resulted in 16.5 hours of recording time, which were then transcribed into 110,426 words (excluding my turns). The resulting 72 texts were subsequently input into WordSmith Tools 4.0, which produced the results in section 2.3 below.

2.2 Variables

Two variables are investigated in this paper: discourse particles and existential constructions. CSE discourse particles have been described extensively (Gupta 1992; Wee 2004; Wong 2004, *inter alia*), and although they fulfil different pragmatic functions (nine are retained in this study), they can be viewed as a single variable for our purposes here. An example of their use is illustrated in (1), where *mah* indicates the information given as obvious, and *lor* conveys a sense of resignation (Wee 2004), while *what* in (2a) contradicts a previous assertion³.

- (1) Because she wants to sing *mah*. So she want to [...] join to sing, so we just groom her *lor*. (ii.C.rm)
- (2) a. I think got waterfall *what*.
b. I thought there was a waterfall there, isn't there?

Existential constructions are realised with *got* in CSE (cf. (2a)), where SSE has *there+BE*, as in (2b). This holds true for locatives as well (Bao 1995; Teo 1995). I call this the (got) variable here.

2.3 Results

Figure 2 below shows the occurrence rates of discourse particles per 1,000 words across the four situational settings. What is immediately obvious is the way in which the four settings split into two sets of behaviour. The difference between the averages of the two sets of settings is statistically significant⁴.

³ CSE *what* is unrelated to the English homograph.

⁴ $Z=17.33$, confidence level 0.16%, $p<.0001$ at 95%.

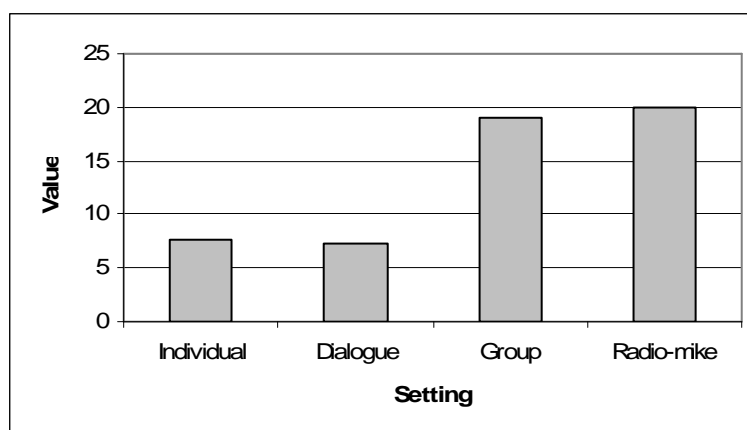


Figure 2: Particles per 1,000 words by situational setting

As far as the (got) variable is concerned, a similar picture emerges. Here the clustering into two sets of behaviour is less obvious, but still statistically significant⁵.

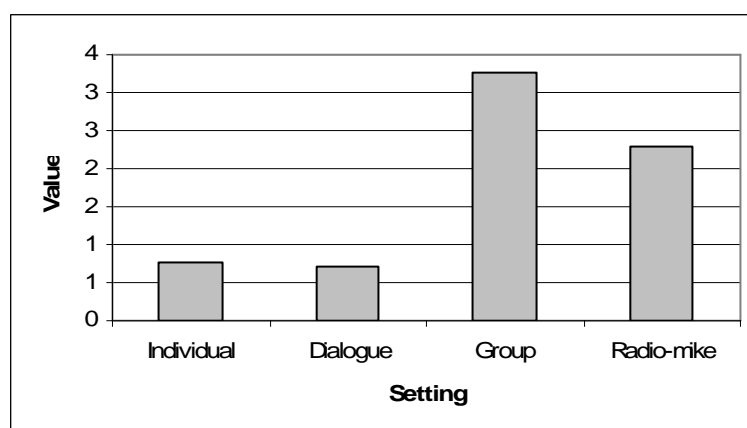


Figure 3: (got) per 1,000 words by situational setting

Results varied across schools as well, with the polytechnic exhibiting more variation across settings than the other two, and the junior college using least L variants.

3 Discussion and conclusions

The results above clearly point towards a diglossic model, since two identifiable codes emerge, with statistically significant differences between them. However, in light of the many L variants occurring in the settings where H is expected, it is suggested that these results, far from disproving the continuum hypothesis, in fact

⁵ Z=8.482, confidence level 0.06%, p<.0001 at 95%.

show the variety's current stage on a diachronic path from Platt's 1975 analysis towards Gupta's 1994 diglossia, which seems, as it were, ahead of its time. I therefore propose the model illustrated in Figure 4 below, which seeks to show diglossia at an individual level, as well as the synchronic state of SgE as a variety that may achieve fergusonian diglossia in due time, given the right social and planning factors.

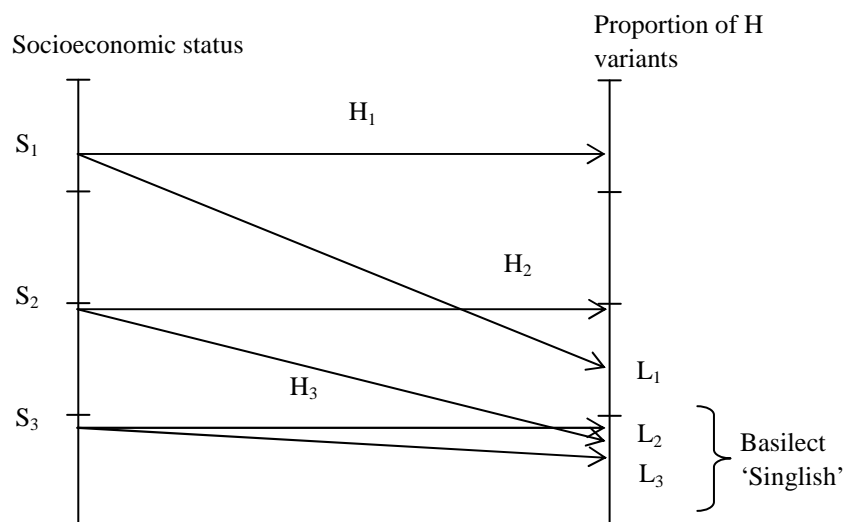


Figure 4: Diglossic variation in SgE

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