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SUBSTRATE INFLUENCE ON THE GRAMMAR OF SINGLISH AND INDIAN ENGLISH: A COMPARATIVE LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract: Singapore Colloquial English (Singlish) and Indian English are two of the most widely studied New Englishes, yet they emerged in contact settings dominated by typologically different substrate languages. This article examines how far the grammatical features of the two varieties can be linked to substrate influence. Using a qualitative comparative-descriptive method, it classifies features reported in published grammatical descriptions according to the proposed substrate source and the strength of the supporting evidence. The analysis shows that Singlish grammar is shaped most visibly by Sinitic and Malay patterns in tense–aspect marking, predicate structure, topic prominence and discourse particles, whereas Indian English shows substrate-related patterns mainly in article use, tag questions, focus marking, reduplication and echo formation. Several features, notably non-inverted questions and topicalisation, occur in both varieties and are compatible with both substrate and universal explanations. The article argues that substrate influence is best understood as one factor within a feature pool, and that conclusive attribution requires quantitative corpus-based testing.

Keywords: Singlish; Indian English; substrate influence; World Englishes; language contact; New Englishes; grammar

1. Introduction

The global spread of English has produced varieties whose grammar differs systematically from inner-circle standards (Kachru, 1985; Mesthrie & Bhatt, 2008). Among them, Singapore English and Indian English are two of the best described, and both are routinely cited as cases in which the languages spoken in the community left traces in the grammar of English (Platt & Weber, 1980; Sailaja, 2009). Such traces are usually called substrate influence: the transfer of structures from the first languages of bilingual speakers into the second language which, once shared by a community and passed on to the next generation, become features of a new variety (Thomason & Kaufman, 1988; Winford, 2003).

Singlish, the colloquial end of the Singaporean English continuum as distinct from the standard variety taught in schools (Gupta, 1994), developed in a society where Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil were in daily contact with English (Platt & Weber, 1980; Leimgruber, 2013). Indian English developed under British colonial rule in an even larger multilingual landscape, with Indo-Aryan and Dravidian languages as the main first languages of its speakers (Kachru, 1983; Sailaja, 2009). Both varieties therefore arose in multilingual ecologies, but the typology of their substrates differs considerably. Sinitic languages are largely isolating, mark tense weakly and rely on aspect particles, whereas the main South Asian languages are predominantly verb-final languages with postpositions and rich systems of case and agreement.

Substrate explanations are not uncontested. Many features of New Englishes also appear in learner varieties and contact vernaculars irrespective of the speakers' first language, which supports explanations based on universals of second language acquisition; others may be retentions from older or nonstandard British input, that is, superstrate influence (Mufwene, 2001; Siemund, 2013). Ansaldo (2004) proposes that the evolution of Singapore English should be traced to a contact matrix dominated by Sinitic and Malay, while Sharma (2009) shows that New Englishes differ typologically in ways that broadly follow their substrates. What is still missing is a side-by-side comparison of the two varieties under a single classification of features and evidence.

This article addresses that gap through three research questions. RQ1: which grammatical features of Singlish and Indian English have been linked to substrate languages in the literature? RQ2: do the two varieties differ in the grammatical domains and mechanisms through which substrate influence is claimed to operate? RQ3: how strong is the evidence for substrate explanations compared with explanations based on universals and superstrate input?

2. Methods

2.1 Design and data

The study follows a qualitative comparative-descriptive design based on secondary data. No new speech data were collected. The sources fall into two groups: (a) grammatical descriptions of Singapore English (Platt & Weber, 1980; Wee, 2004; Lim, 2004; Leimgruber, 2013) and of Indian English (Bhatt, 2004; Sailaja, 2009; Lange, 2012); and (b) studies devoted to individual features, such as the aspectual system of Singapore English (Bao, 2005), its pragmatic particles (Gupta, 1992) and article use in Indian English (Sharma, 2005). Language examples are those attested in, or adapted from, these sources and are given for illustration only.

2.2 Selection and coding of features

A feature was included if it was (i) grammatical rather than phonological or lexical, (ii) described for the variety in more than one of the sources above, and (iii) accompanied by a proposed substrate source. Each feature was coded for four properties: the grammatical domain (for example tense–aspect, reference, information structure); the proposed substrate source; the type of evidence (a structural parallel only, or a parallel supported by experimental or corpus findings); and whether the feature also occurs in the other variety or in other New Englishes, which signals a possible universal tendency. On this basis the evidence for each feature was classified as stronger (a structural parallel plus independent empirical support), moderate (a structural parallel with consistent descriptive agreement) or indeterminate (equally compatible with universal or superstrate explanations).

2.3 Analytical framework

To separate substrate influence from rival explanations, three diagnostic questions were applied to each feature. First, does the feature match a specific structure in a named substrate language, including its range of meanings and not only its surface form? Second, does the feature also occur in New Englishes or learner varieties whose substrates are unrelated, which would point to a universal tendency? Third, is the feature attested in older or nonstandard British English, which would point to superstrate retention? A feature that satisfied the first question but not the other two was treated as a stronger substrate candidate; one that satisfied several questions at once was treated as multiply determined.

2.4 Limitations of the design

Because the analysis rests on published descriptions, it cannot provide frequencies or measure variation across speakers, registers and first-language backgrounds. The classification therefore reflects the weight of the existing evidence, not new quantitative testing, and its conclusions are provisional.

3. Results

3.1 Substrate-related features of Singlish

Tense and aspect. Verbs in Singlish are typically unmarked for tense, and time reference is conveyed by adverbials or context (Platt & Weber, 1980; Wee, 2004). The most discussed feature is the use of *already* as a completive or inchoative marker, as in *I eat already* 'I have eaten', which parallels the Chinese sentence-final particle *le*. Bao (2005) argues that the aspectual system of Singapore English as a whole matches that of the Sinitic substrate rather than that of standard English. In the same domain, *got* is reported to express possession, existence and past or perfective meaning, as in *I got see that movie*, in line with Hokkien and Cantonese verbs meaning 'have' (Platt & Weber, 1980; Wee, 2004).

Predicates. Zero copula and adjectives used directly as predicates, as in *He very smart*, are widely reported and match Chinese, where adjectives function as stative predicates without a copula (Platt & Weber, 1980). Bare nouns without plural marking, such as *two book*, are likewise attributed to the absence of obligatory number marking in Sinitic languages.

Information structure. Singlish is described as topic-prominent: a topic is placed first and a comment follows, often with omitted subjects or objects, as in *This kind of thing, cannot eat* (Platt & Weber, 1980; Wee, 2004). The modal verb *can* also serves as a full response, *Can!*, which parallels the Chinese practice of answering with the verb of the question.

Discourse particles and other constructions. Particles such as *lah*, *lor*, *leh* and *mah* mark stance, certainty and speaker–hearer relations, and their sources are traced to Hokkien, Cantonese and Malay (Gupta, 1992; Wee, 2004). Reduplication, as in *slow slow* 'slowly', is related to Malay and Chinese patterns, and the adversity passive with *kena*, as in *He kena scolded*, is derived from Malay *kena* 'to be hit, to get' (Platt & Weber, 1980; Wee, 2004).

3.2 Substrate-related features of Indian English

Articles and reference. Because Hindi and many other Indian languages lack a definite article, article use in Indian English is a classic candidate for transfer. Sharma (2005) shows that article patterns in Indian English follow specificity and discourse status more than the definiteness rules of standard English, and she relates this to the way Hindi marks specific indefinites with the numeral *ek* 'one'. Examples such as *I saw one movie yesterday* are consistent with this account.

Tag questions. The invariant tag *isn't it?*, as in *You are coming tomorrow, isn't it?*, is described as a frequent feature of Indian English and is compared with invariant tags in Hindi (Bhatt, 2004; Sailaja, 2009).

Focus marking, topicalisation and word order. The particles *only* and *itself* are used for emphasis, as in *I went there yesterday only* and *He came on Monday itself*, and are related to emphatic clitics in Indian languages (Sailaja, 2009; Lange, 2012). Left dislocation with a resumptive pronoun, as in *This book, I have read it*, and non-inverted questions, as in *What you are doing?*, are also reported (Bhatt, 2004; Lange, 2012).

Reduplication and echo formation. Reduplication (*small small things*) and echo formation (*tea-vea* 'tea and the like') are productive in Indian languages and are widely attributed to them (Kachru, 1983; Sailaja, 2009). The progressive with stative verbs (*I am knowing the answer*) is reported as well, but it also occurs in many other New Englishes, which weakens a purely substrate-based explanation (Sharma, 2009).

3.3 Comparison of the two varieties

Table 1 summarises the main findings. Three patterns emerge. First, the strongest substrate claims for Singlish concern tense–aspect marking and discourse particles, domains in which Sinitic languages differ most sharply from English and where the English input offers no equivalent. Second, the strongest claims for Indian English concern reference (articles), tag questions and focus marking. Third, several features occur in both varieties, including topicalisation, non-inverted questions and reduplication; their parallel appearance is compatible with similar substrate typology as well as with universals.

Table 1. Selected grammatical features and proposed substrate sources in Singlish and Indian English

Domain	**Singlish (illustrative example)**	**Indian English (illustrative example)**	**Proposed source / evidence**
Tense–aspect	*already*, *got*: *I eat already*	Progressive with statives: *I am knowing*	Singlish: Sinitic, stronger. Indian English: indeterminate
Predicates	Zero copula: *He very smart*	Not characteristic	Singlish: Sinitic, moderate
Reference	Bare nouns: *two book*	Specificity-based articles: *one movie*	Sinitic; Hindi *ek*, moderate
Information structure	Topic-comment: *This kind of thing, cannot eat*	Left dislocation: *This book, I have read it*	Both; also universal, indeterminate
Questions and tags	Non-inverted questions	*isn't it?*; *What you are doing?*	Hindi tags, moderate; universal tendency
Discourse and focus	Particles: *lah*, *lor*, *mah*	*only*, *itself*	Hokkien, Cantonese, Malay; Indian languages
Reduplication	*slow slow*	*small small*; *tea-vea*	Malay, Chinese; Indian languages

4. Discussion

With regard to RQ1, the literature links a broad set of grammatical features in both varieties to substrate languages. Regarding RQ2, the two varieties draw on different parts of the grammar. Singlish shows its clearest substrate effects in the verbal domain and in pragmatics, which fits an ecology where Sinitic and Malay speakers formed the bulk of the learners of English (Ansaldo,

2004; Leimgruber, 2013). Indian English shows its clearest effects in the noun phrase and in information structure, which fits the typological profile of Hindi and other South Asian languages, including verb-final order and the absence of an obligatory definite article (Sharma, 2005, 2009).

As for RQ3, evidence is strongest where a feature has a specific and non-trivial distribution in the substrate that is mirrored in the new variety. Bao's (2005) analysis of *already* is the clearest case, because it explains not only the form but also the range of meanings of the particle. Features such as non-inverted questions, the extended progressive and bare nouns are weaker candidates, since they occur in many New Englishes with different substrates and may reflect general learner tendencies (Siemund, 2013). In such cases it is more productive to follow Mufwene's (2001) feature-pool model, in which several sources of influence, including the substrate, universals and superstrate input, reinforce one another during selection.

The comparison also has a sociolinguistic side. Gupta (1994) describes Singapore as a diglossic setting in which Singlish is the colloquial variety and standard English the formal one, which explains why the most substrate-heavy features cluster in informal speech. Indian English, by contrast, is better described as a relatively stable variety whose features extend into educated usage, a state that Mukherjee (2007) characterises as an equilibrium. In terms of Schneider's (2007) dynamic model, both varieties have passed through nativisation, but their social positions, and hence the visibility of substrate features, are not the same.

Two methodological difficulties deserve mention. The first is that the substrate is not a single language. In Singapore, Hokkien, Cantonese and Teochew share many of the structures relevant here, so a given feature often cannot be traced to one of them in particular, and Malay may reinforce or compete with Sinitic input (Ansaldo, 2004). In India the substrate comprises dozens of languages from two unrelated families, and the fact that features such as reduplication and echo formation are shared across them suggests that typological similarity, rather than any single source language, is the relevant factor (Sharma, 2009).

The second difficulty concerns transmission. For many younger Singaporeans, Singlish is acquired as a vernacular from the surrounding community, and in some homes English is already the first language (Gupta, 1994). For such speakers the substrate is no longer a source of individual transfer but a historical source of features that are inherited from the community. A comparable shift is plausible for speakers who grow up with English in India, although this would need to be tested. This is why a substrate explanation, even when correct, describes the origin of a feature and does not predict how a particular speaker will use it today.

These findings have two practical implications. For description, they support treating the features discussed here as rule-governed properties of a variety instead of random errors. For teaching English in multilingual settings, they suggest that learners' mistakes should be interpreted with reference to their first languages and not only to the target norm (Kirkpatrick, 2007). The limitations of the study must also be acknowledged: it is based on secondary sources, it uses illustrative examples and it cannot quantify variation. Future research should test the proposed substrate links on comparable corpora, such as ICE-Singapore, ICE-India (Greenbaum, 1996) and the web-based GloWbE corpus (Davies & Fuchs, 2015), taking the speakers' first languages into account.

5. Conclusion

The comparison shows that substrate influence is visible in the grammar of both Singlish and Indian English, but it works through different domains: tense–aspect, predicates and discourse

particles in Singlish; articles, tags and focus marking in Indian English. Evidence for substrate influence is strongest for features with a distinctive distribution in the substrate, and weakest for those shared with other New Englishes, where universals and superstrate input cannot be excluded. A balanced account should therefore treat the substrate as one factor in a feature pool. Corpus-based, quantitative studies controlling for speakers' first languages are the next step towards firmer conclusions.

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