

English in Singapore: diglossia or continuum?¹

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Abstract

Several models have been proposed to account for the variation inherent to Singapore English. An early attempt by Platt (1975) takes DeCamp's (1971) post-creole continuum hypothesis and applies it to the Singapore speech community. Standard (Singapore) English becomes the acrolect, colloquial 'Singlish' the basilect, and they, together with the intervening mesolects, form a continuum from which speakers draw for stylistic purposes. The basilect is called a 'creoloid', because a pidgin, so Platt, was not involved in the creation of Singapore English – a view that has been challenged more recently (Ansaldo, 2004).

Another approach is taken by Gupta (1994; 2001), who views the Singapore speech community as diglossic – Standard Singapore English (SSE) is H, and Colloquial Singapore English (CSE, 'Singlish') is L. The two sub-varieties are used in different domains, and while H, promoted by the government, is viewed as a useful socioeconomic asset, L has become a marker of national identity, much more so than the traditional 'mother tongues' of the ethnically diverse population.

This paper attempts to find support for either of these approaches, using partial results from my ongoing research. The data, collected in various situational settings, show that more L features are used as the formality of the interview setting is reduced, thus evidencing focalisation on a binary system, rather than one-way decreolisation. The trend is more noticeable with some variables than with others; but overall, a clear break is observable, which coincides with the presence/absence of the researcher.

1 Introduction

While Singapore English (henceforth SgE) has received a tremendous amount of attention over the past few decades, the question of its sociolinguistic typological status is one that remains unsolved: an early attempt by Platt in 1975 proposed the application of DeCamp's 1971 post-creole continuum to SgE, and concurrently introduced the concept of 'creoloid', of which SgE is, so Platt, a prime example. Other models followed, most notably Gupta's 1994 diglossia approach. All other models can be viewed as based on either of these two approaches.

This paper presents findings from ongoing research, and argues for an open-minded approach to the two opposing models. Rather than being mutually exclusive, a combination of the two seems to explain the observed data most convincingly.

1.1 Background

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Some background may be needed to put SgE into context. Singapore is a small (650 km²) island-state, located about one degree north of the equator, at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula. With a population of just under 4 millions, it is among the world's most densely populated countries.

Singapore was founded in 1819 by Sir Stamford Raffles of the East India Company. Its natural deep-sea harbour made the island a prime choice for the establishment of a badly-needed port in the region. Thanks to its location on a major shipping route, it soon became a vital centre of the Empire in South-East Asia; the port is a major pillar of the economy to this day.

In terms of population structure, when the British landed in 1819, there were not more than a few hundred Malay fishermen on the island, as well as a handful of Chinese. As the city prospered, however, masses of immigrants arrived from the region (Malaya and Indonesia) as well as southern China. The British also brought a good number of South Asian soldiers, civil servants, and teachers, over from their Indian colonies. This explains the complex ethnic make-up of the population, a point of importance to which I shall come back. Since independence, which was thrust on Singapore in 1965, this tiny nation has seen remarkable economic growth and is now second richest territory in East and Southeast Asia after Hong Kong².

1.2 Population

The ethnic composition of the population, according to the 2000 census, is shown in Figure 1 below.

Three quarters of the population are Chinese, some 15% are Malays, and 8% are of South Asian or Indian origin. These are the major groups and are recognised by the government as such: each one of these ethnic groups has one of their languages as an official language – Mandarin for the Chinese, Malay for the Malays, and Tamil for the Indians. In this system of official languages, English is ethnically neutral, and serves as the language of government (all legislation is in English only), the sole medium of education, and the default language of the white-collar workplace.

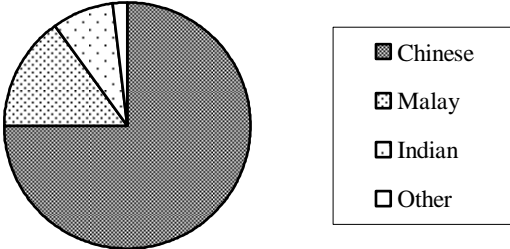


Figure 1: Ethnic composition of Singapore's population (Department of Statistics, 2000b)

² In terms of GDP per capita at purchasing power parity, according to the IMF ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_GDP_\(PPP\)_per_capita](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_GDP_(PPP)_per_capita)).

In terms of actual language use, things are clearly not as simple as the one ethnicity-one language paradigm used by government officials. Figure 2 below shows the answers to the question ‘language most frequently spoken at home’ (2000 census³).

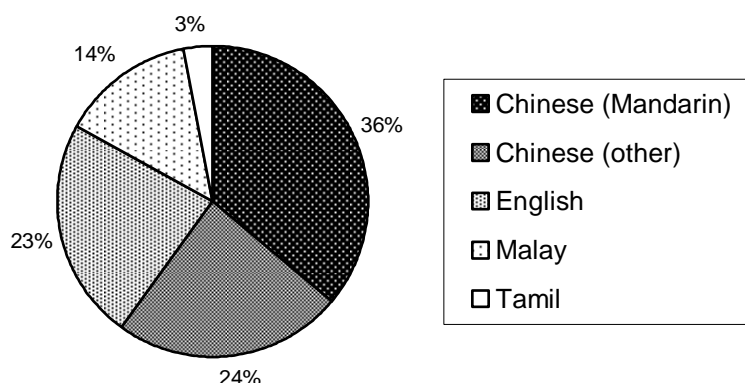


Figure 2: Language most frequently spoken at home (Department of Statistics, 2000a)

Mirroring the ethnic breakdown explained above, Chinese varieties represent the majority of home languages. Mandarin has the largest share. This is a tribute to government language planning: Mandarin is not traditionally the native language of any sizeable Chinese Singaporean group, with most immigrants having come from southern Chinese provinces. The most widely spoken varieties used to be Min Nan (Hokkien, Teochew) and Cantonese, which, nowadays, are in second place after the official variety Mandarin. The Indian community is very diverse, too: Tamil and Malayalam are spoken by a majority, but Panjabi, Hindi, and Urdu are widespread as well. Only the Malay community is relatively uniform; it includes, besides autochthones, also immigrants from Indonesia and the wider Malay-speaking world. English is the main home language for almost a quarter of the population, but this is set to increase, especially since the introduction of English-only education in the late eighties.

2 Singapore English

2.1 Ecology

When talking about English in Singapore, we need to distinguish between Standard Singapore English (SSE), which is often described as Standard English with a Singaporean accent, and Colloquial Singapore English, which is often called ‘Singlish’ by both speakers and policy-makers – and, indeed, academics (Gupta, 1989; 2006b, inter alia; e.g. Platt, 1975). Singlish, or Colloquial Singapore English (CSE), is a contact variety, with an English lexifier and a substrate consisting of mainly southern varieties of Chinese, Malay, and the so-called Indian languages (which includes both Dravidian and Indo-Aryan languages). If the number of speakers is anything to go by, then the Chinese languages are clearly those which left the most lasting impression on CSE.

The variety has many of the features typically found in creoles: copula-deletion, regularised inflections, syntactic plural marking (Ho & Platt, 1993), and a transferred aspect system (Bao,

³ The problems associated with the self-reporting of linguistic usage, such as the Census data used here, have been commented on in the literature (Trudgill 1974; Gupta 1994, inter alia). Following Gupta (1994), however, I use them here on the premise that firstly, they are the best figures available, and secondly, if they do not reflect actual usage, at least they reflect either perceived usage or some kind of aspiration. Neither of these warrant an outright rejection of the data.

2005), to name only few. CSE also has a fair amount of lexical borrowing from the substrate, mainly from Hokkien and Malay. There is also an invariant question tag *is it*, and existential constructions formed by invariant *got* (Bao, 2005; Teo, 1995).

2.2 Analysis of variation

2.2.1 Post-creole continuum

The first proposal for a model for SgE came from John T. Platt in 1975, in a paper where he also introduced the concept of the ‘creoloid’, a contact variety that shares many of the features of a creole but lacks the initial pidgin (which was thought crucial for the definition of a Creole). More importantly, however, he proposed an application of DeCamp’s 1971 analysis of Jamaican Creole English to the Singaporean case. On the diagram in Figure 3 below, the scale on the left represents the social continuum of the Singapore speech community, with lower social classes in the lower part, and higher ones further up the scale. On the right-hand side is the SgE speech continuum, which is analogous to the lectal scale found in Jamaica, with the basilect, ‘Singlish’, at its bottom, and the acrolect SSE, at the top.

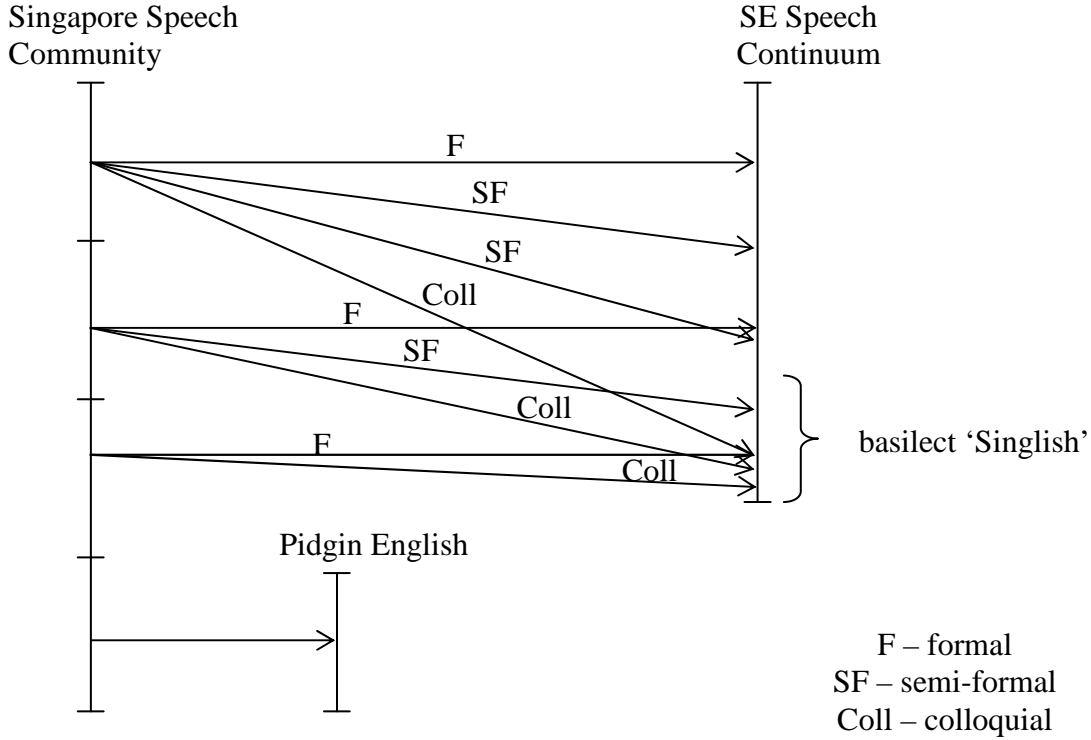


Figure 3: SgE as a post-creole continuum (Platt, 1975: 369)

Figure 3 shows the linguistic repertoires of four speakers of SgE. Each of these commands a variety of lects, and all of them master the basilect to a greater or lesser extent. However, those higher up on the social scale have access to a wider range of sub-varieties, including the acrolect, mesolects, and the basilect. The further down speakers are on the social scale, the narrower the choices of lects.

A central point of this model, and also one of its weaknesses, is that speakers are seen to use their repertoire stylistically, according to the level of formality required by the situational setting. This may seem intuitive at first glance, but raises important questions as to the definition of formality. Platt (1975: 368ff) links this to concepts as diverse as setting, domain, addressee, etc., in which the lect is used: he gives the example of university students conversing in the acrolect to their lecturer, mesolects among themselves, and the basilect to the canteen waitress (1975: 369). This same waitress, however, 'would have only the basilectal variety at her disposal for all uses' (loc. cit.). The fact that speakers approximate the standard more closely in 'formal' situations is in itself not surprising: similar behaviours were observed in a multitude of speech communities (see Labov 1966; Trudgill 1974 for two famous examples). The difference between traditional style-shifting and DeCamp's (1971) post-creole continuum is that in the latter there is, firstly, a diachronic, contact linguistic explanation for the presence of the lectal scale, which is then re-appropriated for stylistic purposes, and secondly, a synchronic association of the basilect and lower mesolects with lower levels of education (and vice-versa).

2.2.2 Diglossia

A different approach is taken by Gupta (1989; 1994; 1998), who regards Singapore as a diglossic speech community, within the original framework of Ferguson's (1959) diglossia. The H variety is SSE, different from Standard British English only in certain aspects of the lexicon, and L is CSE, or 'Singlish'. Her findings are based on work with child speakers of Singlish, so the model is primarily concerned with speakers for whom it is a native language. As in every diglossia, the two varieties H and L are in complementary distribution according to domains of use: here H is taught in school, used in business and government, whereas L is used among peers, in the army, and generally in informal situations. One point where Gupta's brand of diglossia differs from Ferguson's is in the existence of various degrees of code-switching between H and L. This is necessary to explain the different levels of variation observed in everyday use, but does pose a problem if it is based, as Gupta's model is (2006a: 248), on Ferguson's classic definition of complete codes: there is no intra-sentential H-L code-switching in traditional diglossia (except possibly the odd quote or loanword).

These are the two main approaches to variation in Singapore English. Other models proposed can basically be analysed as belonging to either of these two: a continuum of varieties on the one hand (Pakir, 1991; Poedjosoedarmo, 1995), or a diglossic two-way approach on the other (Gupta, 1989, 2006b; Platt, 1977).

3 Current study

3.1 Research question & fieldwork design

My research question, therefore, is: 'Is the variation inherent to Singapore English one that is best analysed as a continuum or as diglossia?'

3.1.1 Informants

In order to answer this question, I use data collected during fieldwork in Singapore. My informants come from three post-secondary institutions (average age 17.5): a vocational training institute, a polytechnic, and a junior college. They differ in terms of entry requirements, with the brightest students going to Junior College, where they get their A-

levels and can apply for university, the middle range going to polytechnic, where they study for a diploma. Those who achieve less well in secondary school usually attend the Institute of Technical Education, a vocational training institution, which is much more practice-oriented. These three options account for almost 90% of all secondary school leavers. I use an equal number of informants from the three ethnic groups Chinese, Malays, and Indians, with 12 informants from each group. Thus the total sample amounts to 36 informants with an equal ethnic and educational distribution.

3.1.2 Interview structure

The interviews were structured as follows: in each of the three schools are three ethnically homogeneous groups of four students, which were recorded on different days, with approximately just over two hours per group. Every participant was first interviewed individually, before moving on to dialogue interviews. Then followed two settings where I was not directly involved, with the last one taking place in a stereotypically relaxed setting, the school canteen. This means that we were gradually moving from a highly formal setting, with one-to-one interaction, to much more informal settings, where I had much less impact on their interaction. In the group recording (stage 3), I was outside the classroom they were in, totally unaware of what they were doing, and during stage 4 (in the canteen), I was outside overheard distance.

These interviews resulted in some 16.5 hours' recording time, which in turn gave a transcription of 110,426 words (excluding turns by the interviewer). The 72 texts (4 individual interviews, 2 dialogues interviews, 1 group and 1 radio-microphone recording, for 9 groups) were then input into WordSmith Tools 4.0 for word counts, giving us the results presented in the next section.

3.2 Variables under investigation

The variables used herein are grammatical: discourse particles and existential constructions. Discourse particles are one of the stereotypical features of Singapore and have been investigated extensively (Gupta, 1992, 2006a; Ho & Platt, 1993; Wee, 2004). Their origin is disputed, but they fulfil important and various pragmatic roles, such as indicating the obviousness of an assertion, or to signal solidarity. They usually occur clause-finally. In this study, nine different ones are investigated, including the high-profile *lah*. Although they do fulfil different pragmatic functions, they can be considered a single variable for our purpose here. Example (1) shows two of them in action: *mah*, which indicates information as obvious, and *lor*, which conveys a sense of resignation (Wee, 2004).

- (1) Because she wants to sing *mah*. So she want to [...] join to sing, so we just groom her *lor*.
(ii.C.rm)⁴

As far as existential constructions are concerned, CSE uses invariable *got* where SSE uses *there is* in sentences like (2) below. It's also common in locative uses such as (3). Again, in a diglossic framework, this is considered indicative of L.

- (2) There got very famous story [...] about the Barang and Randa, something like that.

⁴ ii=polytechnic, C=Chinese, rm=radio-microphone recording.

‘There is a very famous story about the Barang and Randa, or something like that.’
(i.I.gr)⁵

- (3) I think got waterfall *what*.
‘I thought there is a waterfall there, isn’t there?’
(iii.C.gr)⁶

4 Results

4.1 Discourse particles

Figure 4 below shows the results obtained for discourse particle usage per 1,000 words. Firstly, it appears that the first two settings have a roughly equal proportion of particles: 9.26‰ and 9.25‰ respectively. The two less formal settings, however, have a much higher rate – 21.95‰ and 23.98‰ respectively. Thus we have a gradual increase in occurrence rates, but also, secondly, a clear break between the two sets of settings. This break is statistically significant.⁷

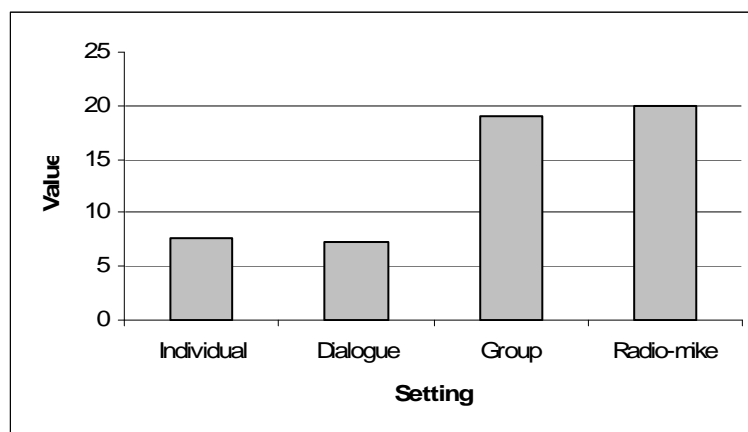


Figure 4: Particles per 1,000 words by situational setting

4.2 Existential/locative constructions

In terms of existential/locative constructions, I’m looking at the occurrence rates of CSE variants per 1,000 words of text. This is shown in Figure 5: again, the two more formal settings score low and relatively equally, whereas in the two less formal settings, many more instances of the diglossic L variant are observed. Here there is very little in terms of a gradual increase, but a very strong indication of a clear break between the two sets of situational settings, which is, again, statistically significant⁸.

⁵ i=junior college, I=Indian.

⁶ iii=vocational school, gr=group recording.

⁷ Z=17.33, confidence level of 0.16%, p<.0001 at 95%.

⁸ Z=8.482, confidence level of 0.06%, p<.0001 at 95%.

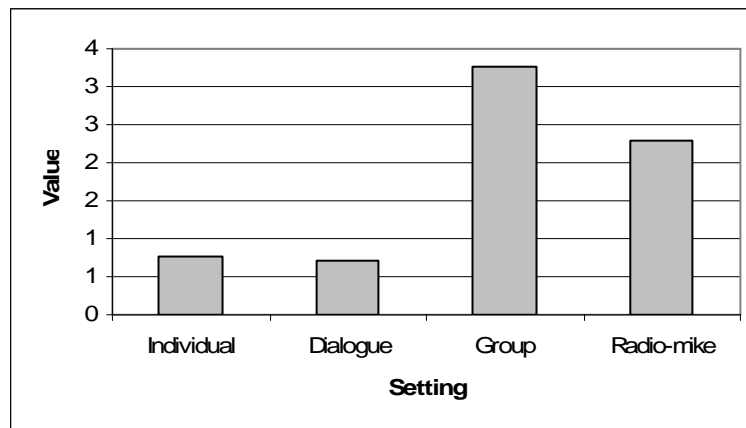


Figure 5: Rates per 1,000 words for (got), according to situational setting

4.3 Discussion

Importantly, both variables follow the same trend. The four situational settings fall into two distinct groups, with a different linguistic behaviour, which is statistically significant. And these two resulting groups also reflect the presence/absence of the researcher, an ‘outsider’. All this seems to point to the existence of two codes, which are used in different settings: is this diglossia?

The diglossia proposed for Singapore by Gupta is, as explained above, one that is explicitly based on Ferguson’s classic diglossia (1959): two related varieties that are in complementary distribution; L is acquired natively while H learned at school, L is used in everyday conversation while H limited to writing and highly formal situations. Gupta, however, allows for code-switching between H and L, something that is slightly controversial in a traditional definition of diglossia. It does happen to a certain extent, more so in the Arabic world (Freeman, 1996) than elsewhere, but intra-sentential code-switching between H and L is certainly not the norm in German-speaking Switzerland, or in Tamil, for example. Another problem is the social meaning of this variation. Platt’s (1975) model clearly shows a difference between the higher classes, who can use acrolectal varieties among themselves, and the lower ones, who are limited to a small slice of the lower lectal scale. This is, again, not in the spirit of Ferguson’s definition, where H ‘is not used by any section of the community for ordinary conversation’ (1959: 435). Not so in Singapore, where social judgements are possible on the basis of one’s English – much in the same way than in other, non-diglossic situations (e.g. Norwich (Trudgill, 1974), New York (Labov, 1966)).

An important point, however, is that the speakers themselves seem to be aware of the existence of two codes: Gupta (2001) shows how this perception is used in online chat-rooms and folk literature, for example, where H and L are used for stylistic effect. Even the government recognises ‘Singlish’ as the target of their annual ‘Speak good English’ campaign (see Rubdy 2001). The complex question of how national (or ethnic, etc.) identity is achieved by linguistic means is tackled elsewhere (e.g. Joseph 2004; and particularly Bockhorst-Heng & Wee 2007 for the Singaporean case) and beyond the scope of this paper, but it is generally the case in diglossic communities that L has a strong identity function (Ferguson 1959; Siebenhaar 2006; inter alia), and it is therefore not surprising to find this in Singapore. This public support, awareness, and acceptance of diglossia – albeit by a different name – should not be ignored either.

5 Conclusion

From the results presented here and the above analysis, I conclude that although, as has been shown, L variants occur in all situational settings, the data clearly show the existence of two codes, which correlate with the formality of the setting. Furthermore, the concept of diglossia, being very much an integral part of the speech community's language attitudes, cannot be dismissed easily. With all this in mind, the initial research question can be provisionally answered by diglossia. Future research will have to, firstly, confirm these trends with other variables, and secondly, look into a satisfactory model for the variation observed both across the two codes, and within both H and L. Only this type of approach can adequately reconcile the two opposing approaches of continuum and diglossia.

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