

Language contact in English

Substrata in Asian Englishes

Kellen Parker VAN DAM 柯禕藍

Chair for Multilingual Computational Linguistics
Universität Passau, Germany

Department of English
National Kaohsiung Normal University
5 November 2025

Note

The following conventions are used to help note what's important

- **highlighted terms** are terms which must be known since they may appear on an exam.
- **bolded terms** are important to know in general, so please ask if they are unfamiliar

Questions are always encouraged!

Introduction



Introduction to language contact

Languages in contact can have mutual effects on each other.

Often these languages are not of equal **prestige**.

This is especially true in **colonial** contexts when one language is imposed as a *lingua franca* for education, or where many adult **L2** speakers converge on one language.

Introduction to language contact

Languages in contact can have mutual effects on each other.

Often these languages are not of equal **prestige**.

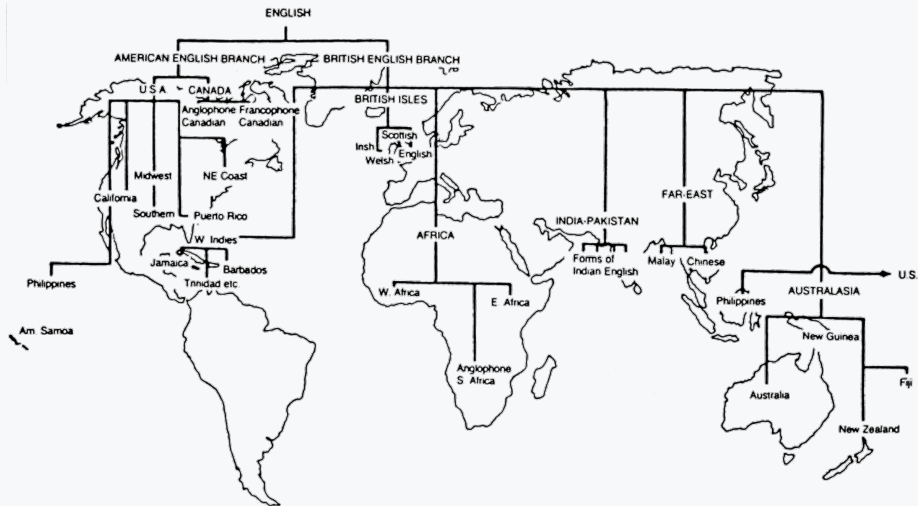
This is especially true in **colonial** contexts when one language is imposed as a *lingua franca* for education, or where many adult **L2** speakers converge on one language.

Language contact can influence **pronunciation, syntax, vocabulary**, and even **semantics***

For English, British Colonialism has resulted in many such local Englishes.

Today we will investigate **two such examples**.

e.g. German *Arbeit* 'work' borrowed into Korean as 아르바이트 for 'part-time job'



From: Strevens, 1992. "English as an International Language: Directions in the 1990s"

Singaporean English

Singaporean English (SgE)

In both of the examples we will discuss, English is the **superstratum** - the higher-status language

In Singapore, there are multiple **substrata** (singular: *substratum*), primarily:

- **Malay** and **Hokkien** as early **trade languages**
- and later, **Cantonese** (Lim 2007)



Singaporean English (SgE)

In both of the examples we will discuss, English is the **superstratum** - the higher-status language

In Singapore, there are multiple **substrata** (singular: *substratum*), primarily:

- **Malay** and **Hokkien** as early **trade languages**
- and later, **Cantonese** (Lim 2007)

The main effects that **mark** SgE are the **prosody** (or intonation* and cadence), and the use of **modal particles** or 語氣詞.

Correct use of the modal particles is a significant **shibboleth** or indicator of being a proficient or native speaker (Wong 2004).

* And in some cases, maybe even developing a tonal system (Ng, 2008)

Modal particles

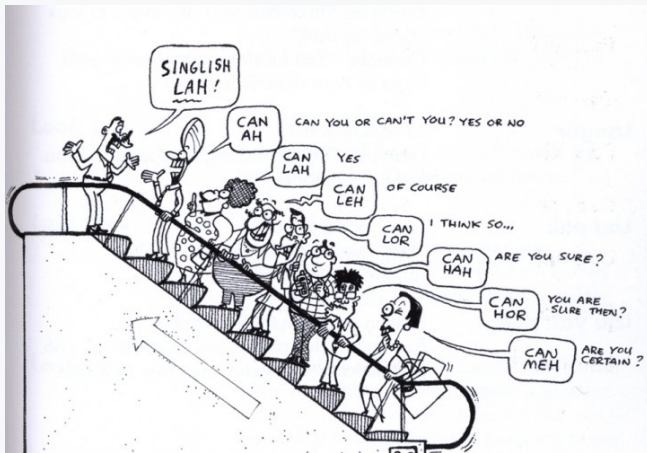
In languages like Mandarin, where **intonation** is less significant (or available) for conveying moods, **modal particles** are an alternative way to convey the speaker's attitude.

你來吧	general command
你來呀	friendlier
你來咯~了喔	impatient / threatening

English does not use these, but rather relies on intonation.

Except, of course, English varieties with much stricter **prosody**, such as SgE

Singapore English



From: globalliteratures.wordpress.com/2016/02/11/writing-singlish/

Modal particles in Singaporean English

Some of the more common particles are directly taken from Chinese languages:

1. **lah** functions as emphasis, softening, confirmation-seeking
2. **meh** conveys disbelief, borrowed directly from Cantonese to include the tone
3. **lor** indicates dismissiveness and a degree of speaker knowledge

These three are old, but new forms are still being introduced into SgE.

For example, **sia** used by younger speakers to express shock or disbelief.

Modal particles in SgE are an important marker of **national identity**, showing clear and sometimes intentional **substratum** influence.

Prosodic features of SgE

English dialects often differ considerably in **prosody**.

For example, Australian English has much more pitch changes than northern American English

Likewise, Singaporean English features predictable **word-final high tones** on content words, *regardless* of underlying stress placement.

This means less prominent English *word-level* stress patterns, and much greater importance of *phrase-level* pitch marking. English, commonly described as **stress timed** is, in Singapore more similar to being **syllable timed***

*note that *isochrony*, the notion of regularity in rhythm, is a useful concept but not a hard truth

Conclusions around Singaporean English

1. SgE presents an interesting case of a heavily conforming variety of the language, showing features from **Malay** and **Sinitic**.
2. While **ethnolects** are still found in Singapore, the dialect's wide-spread use is not restricted only to speakers of those backgrounds, especially among younger speakers.
3. It is a good example of a **substratum** / **superstratum** situation where the source languages are easily detected (even precisely in some cases e.g. Cantonese).

Indian English

Indian English (IndE)

English has been a common *lingua franca* in many parts of India although Hindi is now being pushed by the ruling party.

It has a number of interesting features which are often **calques** of forms from other South Asian languages.



Calques are near-direct translations between languages, e.g. *long time no see* from 好久不見

Adjectival reduplication in Indian English

One example is the highly **productive** use of **reduplication**, particularly for the purpose of **intensification**.

That is, rather than using a word like “very”, IndE speakers will often repeat an adjective or adverb.

- “hot hot coffee” - very hot coffee
- “long long hair” - very long hair
- “slowly slowly” - very slowly

While IndE is not a monolith, and different forms do exist, adjective reduplication is a typical morphosyntactic construction across varieties (Deterding & Kirkpatrick, 2006)

Verbal reduplication in Indian English

Reduplication of verbs can also be used to convey emphasis or warmth, depending on the context.

- "Come come!"
- "Sit sit!"
- "Go go!"

More often than not this results in a warmer sense similar to particles like 呀 in Mandarin.

Verbs can also be reduplicated to indicate **continued action** or **repetition**, as well as other common features of reduplication found cross-linguistically.

Indian-Chinese typological parallels?

Other expressions found in English may be more familiar to Mandarin speakers, including *ass* “three four days”, expressing approximation or a range of numbers.

Compare 「三四天」 with the same function.

In American or British English this would more usually require “*or*” to be deemed correct.

As with reduplication, these are functions found in the regional **substrate** languages. It’s found in Hindi, Bangla, Punjabi and other Indo-Aryan languages.

It is also not random, but is **pragmatically conditioned** and semantically significant.

IndE also shows similar prosodic effects due to substrata, as with SgE.

Pragmatic functions

Like with Chinese and Singaporean English **modal particles** (語氣詞), the use of **reduplication** in Indian English serves the purpose of:

1. softening language. *longer is often considered softer, cross-linguistically*
2. conveying cultural norms across languages, and
3. providing additional stylistic choices in speech

It's also much less common in formal **registers**, typically being limited to spoken communication.

Is there a Taiwanese English?

Taiwan English?

Corpus-based studies point to certain features such as a lack of plural marking (Rüdiger, Leimgruber, & Tseng, 2023)

Yang (2012) points to “relaxing of the unstressed word-final /i/”

However, this is also the case among Mandarin L1 speakers in general.

These may be better understood as production errors rather than English dialectal signifiers.

Why only production errors?

Taiwan lacks the same historical context of being a British Colony.

English was never a significant trade language here unlike e.g. colonial Shanghai

Colonial effects on the language are rather in the form of *shinjitai* 新字體*
or other contact effects relating to the Colonial past.

The features we see are not **systematic** or wide-spread, especially not in any way that is unique to Taiwan.

*e.g. 關 → 関

Could we predict features of a Taiwanese English?

There is evidence of Mandarin-L1-specific markers.

We might predict Taiwanese *Mandarin* features such as pre-verbal 「有」 marking perfectivity to show up, except this is already the case in English “have”.

Notably pre-verbal 「有」 is also an effect of contact with Hokkien.

But many features already reflect a more English-like pattern, especially following the reforms around the 五四運動 period in the early 1900s.

But these should also be expected with speakers of Nanjing Mandarin, and even pre-verbal 有 is becoming more common in China due to Taiwanese media.

Conclusion

- World Englishes often show clear features of **substrata**, reflecting the language spoken in the region prior to the arrival of English
- In many cases, this is directly tied to the use of *English as a colonial language*, rather than just local accents or production errors.
- Taiwan's lack of British colonial history precludes such a situation.
- The high levels of **L2** English in Taiwan, along with efforts by the NCD and other political entities at promoting English in Taiwan ensures that we will not likely see specific **markers** of Taiwanese English, especially as development continues.

Thank you! Questions?

References

- Deterding, David & Andy Kirkpatrick (2006). *"Emerging South-East Asian Englishes and intelligibility"*. In: *World Englishes* 25.3-4, pp. 391–409.
- Lim, Lisa (2007). *"Mergers and acquisitions: On the ages and origins of Singapore English particles"*. In: *World Englishes* 26.4, pp. 446–473.
- Ng, E-Ching (July 11, 2008). *"Malay meets Chinese meets English: Where does Colloquial Singaporean English word-level tone come from?"* In: *Language Transfer Workshop*. Paper presented at Language Transfer Workshop, UWE Bristol, 11 July 2008. UWE Bristol.
- Rüdiger, Sofia, Jakob R. E. Leimgruber, & Ming-I Lydia Tseng (2023). *"English in Taiwan: Expanding the scope of corpus-based research on East Asian Englishes"*. In: *English Today* 39.2, pp. 100–109. DOI: 10.1017/S0266078422000062.
- Strevens, Peter (1992). *"English as an International Language: Directions in the 1990s"*. In: *The Other Tongue: English across Cultures*. Ed. by Braj B. Kachru. 2nd ed. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, pp. 27–47.
- Wong, Jock (2004). *"The particles of Singapore English: A semantic and cultural interpretation"*. In: *Journal of Pragmatics* 36.4, pp. 739–793.
- Yang, James H (2012). *"A socio-phonological analysis of Taiwan English from the perspective of world Englishes"*. In: *Taiwan Journal of Linguistics* 10.1, pp. 115–142.